

THE IDEOLOGY OF KINGSHIP IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM: A PRELIMINARY LOOK

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The ideology of Kingship is a concept that expresses the status, power and functions of the King of a particular time and area. It also reflects the relations between the King (representing the State) and the Subject community. Both these aspects are components of the ideology of Kingship and are Supplementary of each other. A problem with the either could weaken the other. What is significant is that, that both these aspects were ideological relations and they worked as long as the ideology was not imbalanced and weakened. But the ideological relations were based and justified by actual functioning at the structural (Base) level as will be seen from the discussion below. It is this relationship which in some social formations, helps perpetuate the rule of individual kings and his lineage. The lineage or family's rule was legitimised by such ideology which in course of time became a combination of tradition and belief. The monarch in these ideologies was given a divine status. His functions were seen in an inverted form. The kings were viewed as celestial, of divine origin and his functions as sacred-approved and instructed by the Divinity. They were believed to be sent by God and possess superhuman power. In other words there developed a Fetishism of the monarch. The King was not only seen as a guarantor of the welfare and protector of the subject community, he was also seen as the guarantor of the fertility and higher returns of land, higher surplus appropriation and so on.

In medieval social formations the continuation of the reign of a monarch was legitimised through his birth-genealogy. And a particular family's rule

was approved on the basis of certain concepts prevalent about the family. In other words Kingship was not just an aspect of state formation; it had ideological base too, which was 'hegemonic' in nature. The Theory of Divine Origin of State and the Divine Right Theory are perhaps the oldest theories regarding the origin of state. And it was not peculiar to Asiatic Societies.¹ In feudal formations of Europe too Kingship had an ideological foundation. Marc Bloch had shown² that the belief (which rose almost accidentally) that both the English and French kings were endowed with 'healing' powers was a fundamental part of the concept of Royalty and an important element in maintaining the strength of the respective monarchs which also helped the regime's perpetuation.

In medieval Assam the Ahom kings were believed to have possessed divine status and whose functions were postulated to be ordained by the Divinity. Among the divine attributes of the monarch was the theory that the Ahom kings had divine origin. The theory was evolved by the monarchy itself. Accordingly Lengdon, the King of heaven directed his son Thankham to descend to earth and establish a kingdom. At the reluctance of Thankhama, his sons Khunlung and Khunlai descended from heaven to earth by means of a golden chain (in about 568 A.D.). They brought with them an idol called Somdeo, a Hengdang or sword and two drums which could be used for invoking the divinity and four cocks for calculating bad omen.³

One authority believed that this theory was of local origin which came into existence during the latter part⁴ of the 17th century during the reign of Lora Raja. But Gait found that Ahoms had in fact brought the theory along with them when they migrated to Assam. Similar story was prevalent among the Shans of Upper Burma and both aimed at attributing divine ancestry to the Ahom Kings.⁵

The Ahom Kings ruling in Assam⁶ assumed the title Chao-pa, meaning Heavenly-King. Later with their adoption of Hinduism, this title as well was Hinduised and henceforth they assumed the title Swargadeva which was a short form of Swaraganarayande⁷va. This was an Assamese equivalent of Chao-pa. This title accentuated the celestial status origin of the Kings. They could not be equated with other average human beings. They were thus above the general populace, they were celestial and supra-human beings. Hence they were fit to rule over the common people. In other words people accepted them as their king purely on the basis of the theory that they were superior beings having Divine ancestry and Divine status. The theory was the ideology on the strength of which not only the Kings but their family and offsprings were accepted as the people fit to be Kings. In this way the Royal lineage was perpetuated. The idea was coined and fastened to grow into a belief that it was ordained by the providence that a particular family or lineage or clan was fit to rule over a particular people. It was done by the propagation and proclamation of various ideas, beliefs and rituals. For example, the Ahoms coined that men must inherit royal blood to aspire the throne; it meant only a prince or a⁸ member of the royal family could become a King. Thus non-royal family members were excluded as long as the prevailing ideology worked. And thus threats to the throne from the subjects were eliminated. The theory which in course of time had become a tradition further laid down⁹ that ordinary persons would not be worthy rulers. As such 'worthy beings'¹⁰ were sent down to the earth to become kings. No state could be built or developed by beings of ordinary human blood and flesh. It required Godly elements in the body to become a king which were found only in those who had divine ancestry. Eight blood currents of the eight heavenly Gods (Asta-Vasu) are said to have entered the body of

the Ahom kings to enable them to build and rule the state.¹¹ Such ideas had the sanction of the priestly class thereby confirming the solidity of the theory for the common people. The Charing-Phukan or the head priest addressed the king publicly after his enthronement, as, 'O son of Indra, Lord of Heaven; you are made the king under the commands of God. You are hereby enthroned and made the ruler of this land; you are here hereby bestowed with all the powers and virtues of Indra, the Lord of Heaven'.¹²

Other theories that were fostered and which eventually emerged to be a belief that since the kings were of heavenly origin they were physically different too, from the common people. Like, a King was sacred and perfect,¹³ free of any blemish, scars or marks of injuries. They¹⁴ were also free of any diseases and accidents. On the one hand, this belief made the common people look upon the kings as truly higher beings (a physical proof of a ideological belief), and on the other hand, the ruling community itself used it as a means to debar rival claimants from occupying the throne by forcefully making them scared and blemished.

While the rule of monarchs were founded on the ideology, there was another aspect of the ideology. It was confirmed and perpetuated by the priestly class thereby providing legitimacy to the rule of the Ahoms. The monarch ruled with the blessings and approval of the priestly class. In their pursuits the kings were constantly guided by such class. Not only these, the monarch posed that he was always being guided by the Deities. Consequently his tasks were always expressed through religious symbols and rituals.

Since the King was a higher being to the people, he also had 'Great' responsibilities and duties towards his subjects. The common people expected them to perform them as he was

a higher being and capable of succeeding in most difficult of tasks. These tasks were protecting of subjects from external attacks and internal strifes, natural calamities, organisation of public works distribution and redistribution of land resources, irrigation facilities and thus ensure that community was economically prosperous. The Ahom kings carried out these works through his expert knowledge of seasonal cycles governing agricultural production, organisation of stores, utilisation of the manpower available at his disposal in construction of dams, ponds, roads and supply of scarce goods to the people. In return the subjects paid him tribute in form of taxes or services.

The Ahom kings' professed duty was to always work for the good of the people.¹⁵ The tradition said that the Ahom kings were like a gigantic tree under which his subjects could sit¹⁶ and receive protection from the scorching sun. At least theoretically the Ahom kings were great warriors and had to go to the battlefield to exhibit gallantry to prove it. The kings had to be capable of protecting his subjects from external aggression. In fact, one of the Ahom kings Jayadhwaj Simha was confronted by poharis (fisherwomen) who ridiculed him for not being able to protect his subjects¹⁷ from Mughal aggression when he was fleeing.

However, the Ahom kings performed great feats in the construction of public works. Most of the existing roads of Assam were constructed by the Ahom kings. Public construction works were undertaken on an extensive scale. Excavation of gigantic tanks, embankments, roads, bridges and canals were some principal works provided for the benefit of the people. For carrying out such works and the provision of irrigation facilities a huge manpower was necessary. The Ahoms organised a state militia comprising of the entire male adult

population (15 to 60 age group). Attached serfs, slaves and priests and noblemen were exempted but the rest of the population had to render service to the state. Each of the militia was known as paik and a unit of four paiks was called a Got. Each got was jointly responsible for a man-year of obligatory service to the state. One member of each got was obliged to report for duty in rotation at appointed places for such work as might be required of him. In times of emergency, like war, the second and even the third members of a got could be called at one or the same time.

This militia was employed to carry out public works. Other than the construction of roads, tanks, embankments, bridges and canals the militia was also employed to reclaim cultivable land from forests and swamps. The lands were then carefully levelled up by them. Shihabuddin Talish in his report alludes to¹⁸ such magnificent surfacing in the then Assam. An irrigation network was also constructed using this militia. Hundreds of miles of river embankments, crossed by high raised pathways or walls and joined by bunds graduating down to and connecting villages and fields formed a network that helped retain or keep out the inundations.¹⁹ This helped agriculture because the grassy banks and islands of the Brahmaputra being sandy and exposed to annual flood were unfit for any kind of permanent cultivation. The militia system was reorganised from time to time though its basic structure and functions remained the same.

The Ahom monarchy also arranged to supply some consumer items to its subjects which were scarce in Assam. Salt was one such item. Thus in addition to the political and legal functions the Ahom monarchs also fulfilled an important economic function in relation to the community

by helping the process of production and the fertility of soil itself. It helped to enhance his image as a heavenly monarch as visualised in the prevalent ideology. The Theory of Divine Origin of State or Kingship was not evolved by the people as is believed. As seen in our case it was evolved by the regime itself. In fact, it was to adapt Gramsci's concept a part of the system: It was organic ideology.

The concept of kingship was actually a reflection of the structural relationship of the vis-a-vis the village communities. The Divine attributes of kings postulated were based on the actual function that, say, the Ahom kings performed what appeared ideologically the heavenly attributes of the monarchs were merely the effects of his function in the appropriation, distribution of utilisation of surplus labour e.g. organisation of public works, provision of irrigation network, redistribution of land and so on.²⁰ But such concept of kingship as visualised in the ideology was an inextricable part of the system prevalent without which the monarchy could be threatened and the system collapsed. It also helped a lineage to continue because the existence of the ideology rendered legitimacy to the regime. The actual apparatus of the state whether administration was centralised or decentralised might be subdivided into departments controlled by a whole series of functionaries, carrying out ceremonial, administrative, religious, intellectual and other functions but at the apex of the apparatus was always the reigning monarch and his family or lineage. Since ideology played such an important role it had to be religionised. In other words it had to have the sanction of the religion of the community and the vanguards of the religion the priestly classes. Hence the monarch was constantly guided by the deities and priests and his tasks had to be always expressed through religious symbols and rituals.

This first necessitated the Hinduisation of the 'Origin of the Ahoms Kings' theory and then, installation and construction of temples and other symbolic buildings as well as the maintenance of a regular body of religious functionaries to guarantee the success of the endeavour. These were in addition to his regular tasks like protection of his subjects, construction of public works and provision of irrigation system, maintenance of law and order and so on.

As a result of these practices, the 'kingship' itself was totally fettered. King's attributes, ancestry and status as a higher-being became a belief and proverbial in course of time. Thus the actual relationship between the monarch and the village communities appear in an inverted form and the King ideologically perceived as the guarantor of the welfare of the people could only be as much, given the exploitative relations existing between the state represented by the King and the village communities. Similarly the priestly class which legitimised the kings enthronement and his practices, thus fostering the growth the ideology of Kingship, could only exist as an effect of the process which Kosambi called 'feudalism from above' i.e. granting lands of privileges to the priestly class and the distribution of the realised payments and services by the state.

Thus perpetuated by the monarchy and supported by the spiritual aristocracy ideology came to have hegemonic effect on the village communities. The king's divine attributes etc. which were the dictates of the ideology coined, was accepted by the people as long as the King performed his duties and functions vis-a-vis the village communities effectively as was expected of him. But when he failed in his political and economic functions the foundation of the monarchy also was rendered

fragile because it shook and weakened the beliefs of the community regarding the Kingship.

The Assamese history showed that the emergence of a stronger ideology which posed to be an alternative to the existing concept of kingship could also weaken the monarchy and make people rebel against the latter in favour of the former. This was unthinkable to the people hitherto. The rise of the Vaishnava movement of Shankardev and the Mayamaria rebellion were such examples. Ideologically the Vaishnava movement was so strong that some of the Sattra institutions almost ran parallel governments. In the beginning the Ahom government had to grant land and resources to the Vaishnava monasteries but when they became too powerful in terms of resources and mass following the Ahom government had to evolve devices to suppress these institutions.

The Mayamaria Rebellion²¹ though was basically a peasant movement, the ideology which can be called 'Mayamaria ideology', unified these peasants to emerge as a force to reckon with. To the Mayamarias theirs was a superior ideology than that of the Kingship in form and content. The way that rebellion began, showed that they had considered so. It was viewed as an alternative to the existing monarchy. Hence the rebellion broke out against the Ahom monarchy and initiated the crisis which brought about the collapse of the Ahom monarchy.

Notes & References

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12. **Ibid.**, p. 81.
13. **Ibid.**, p. 73.
14. **Ibid.**
15. **Ibid.**, p.37.
16. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.) **Satsari Ahom Buranji**, Gauhati Univ., p.130.
17. **Ibid.**, pp. 90-91. The fisherwomen said to the fugitive King at Dolouguri road, "O Lord, you have paid attention to only pleasures and comforts. If you had thrown fifteen piles of earth at proper places you would not have faced this fate. Where are you going leaving us in a state of danger?".
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