

The Ancient Ahom-Naga Relations

By L. L. Yaden

In the present tense political situation prevailing between the Governments of Assam and Nagaland over the boundary dispute, it is important to know the historical background of the Ahom - Naga relations during the period of the Ahom kings before the East India Company annexed the Ahom kingdom by the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. The Assam-Naga Boundary dispute has to be examined in its proper perspective to understand the ancient cordial and friendly relations maintained between the Ahom and the Nagas. The living elders of the people of Assam and Nagaland still remember the friendship maintained during those so many years between the Ahoms and the Nagas besides those historical accounts recorded in the Ahom history. But unfortunately, those cordial and friendly relations maintained between the Ahoms and the Nagas are at present almost forgotten after the annexation of the Ahom kingdom by the East India Company. The East India Company, later the British Empire, while ruling over Assam and the Naga Hills created several legal barriers between the Ahoms and the Nagas thereby depriving mutual contact maintained between them; because the British had economic interest for expansion of the Tea Industry in the Assam valley encroaching on Naga territories at the foothills of the Naga Hills. It is, therefore, necessary for all men of goodwill to understand the present problems intentionally created by the British Government for their imperial economic interest at the cost of the Nagas and to revive the cordial and friendly relationship between the Assamese and the Nagas in the general interest of both the States and the people.

When king Hso-Ka-Hpa (Shuka-

pha) entered the present Brahmaputra valley of Assam from the East through the Patkai Hills in the early part of 13th century, the original name of the Ahom kingdom was called Mung-dun-Shun-Kham means a country full of gardens of gold. Soon after the establishment of his new kingdom, king Hso Ka Hpa faced fierce opposition from the Nagas living in the hills around. Accordingly, there were many fierce battle fought between king Hso Ka Hpa and the Nagas and in some cases king Hso-Ka Hpa meted out inhuman and most cruel treatment to the Naga captives. The history of the Ahom kings frequently mentions of many wars between the Ahoms and the Nagas and also their cordial and friendly relations maintained between them. The Ahom kings and their nobles who came to Assam from the East had racial and ethnic affinities with the Nagas and they were all good fighters. As such, the Ahom kings and their nobles adopted a policy of reconciliation and understanding between the Ahoms and the Nagas to maintain peace among them by arranging annual contacts in the plains mostly in the winter and the spring seasons.

Many recent Writers, Administrators and Anthropologists have given different explanations and connotations on the original word Naga according to their interpretation and imagination only after annexation of the Ahom kingdom by the East India Company and after the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826; but the word Naga appears to have been originated from the Assamese word "NO-GA" that is NO means new, GA means body, meaning NEW BODY or NEW MAN; because those wild Nagas fully armed with warring dress moved always in groups in the adjacent

plains of Assam coming down from distant dense forests in the high hills and frequently marauding in the plains. And gradually the corruption of the tune NOGA became NAGA that is New Man of the hills with different costume. The pronunciation of the word NAGA becomes NOGA in Assamese if the first alphabet A after N is also pronounced as O. This can be best illustrated from the Ahom history. The designation of the word KATAKI written in the Ahom history is to be pronounced as KOTOKI in Assamese. The pronunciation of the word Katakai becomes Kotoki if both the Alphabet A is pronounced as O. Alexander MacKenzie in his book "History of the relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal" published in 1884 used the appropriate word 'Kotokies'. In Assamese the words Naga and Katakai are pronounced as NOGA and KOTOKI respectively. The word Naga and Katakai were in use for some centuries before the modern writers came to Assam and Naga Hills.

The Ahom kings adopted the method of maintaining peace with the Nagas by calling the Chiefs of the independent Naga villages for annual trade to the Ahom capital where the visiting Nagas were well looked after and the Nagas also gave presents to the Ahom kings as token of friendship. The Nagas were given freedom of movement in the capital of the Ahom kingdom. As such, Rongpur, the ancient city of the Ahom kingdom was a free city for the Nagas. Those various Naga tribes particularly the Konyaks and the Aes living in the proximity of the Capital could move freely in the old city of Rongpur without fear of their lives although

those Nagas were fighting against each other beyond the Ahom Naga boundary. The Nagas were told not to conduct raids on the Ahom villages inside the Ladoigarh, Dohgarh and the Naga Bund constructed as the Ahom-Naga boundary in 1633 and after. The Ahom kings did not allow settlement of the Ahoms beyond the recognised boundary with the Nagas. There were many free markets called Naga Khats earmarked for the Nagas at different places for maintenance of peace and harmony between the Ahoms and the Nagas. The Katakis were entrusted on behalf of the Nagas to look after these Naga Khats reserved for the Nagas in the plains. The functions of the Katakis were to maintain a channel of communication between the Ahom kings and the Naga Chiefs and to preserve peace at the Ahom-Naga boundary.

Realising that the Nagas were good fighters and caused a lot of troubles to the Ahom kings at the border between the Ahoms and the Nagas, the Ahom kings further strengthened the relationship between the Ahoms and the Nagas through some means of matrimonial alliance. Even king Hse Ka-Hpa in spite of all his valour and disciplined army at his command, he had to adopt a policy of recruiting emissaries to maintain the foreign relationship with the Nagas noticing their war-like attitude against the Ahoms.

King Hse-Pem-Hpa after ascending to the Ahom throne in the middle of 15th century offered the hands of one of his young queens to the visiting Naga Chief (Khunbao) a fast friend of the king as the king noticed that his young queen had developed liking for his Naga Chief of very handsome physique dressed in warring attire. The king presented his young queen to the Naga Chief and the Naga Chief took her to his village in the hills. In course of time, a handsome son was born by the queen in the house of the Naga Chief. The Naga Chief, however, understanding the hard life in the hills sent down the queen with the son under proper escort to the Ahom palace. The young Naga Prince born by the young queen grew up very handsome with good physique and a good fighter. Meanwhile, King Hse-Pem-Hpa died and his son succeeded to the throne. Till then there were only two officers or Ministers called Buragohain and Bargohain; but the new

king wanted to accommodate the son of the Naga Chief giving him a very high position to maintain the relationship of his father with the Naga Chief. So office of the third Minister was created called the Barpatra Gohain and Kan Seng the son of the Naga Chief became the first Barpatra Gohain by assuming the office of the third Minister. All the three Ministers were equal in status; but in later years, the office of the Barpatra Gohain became more powerful and more influential. Kan Seng, Barpatra Gohain conducted many victorious wars against the enemies and crushed many revolts and he proved to be one of the ablest Generals during the Ahom period. The descendants of the Barpatra Gohain (Kan Seng) proved more loyal to the king in time of wars against the enemies and the palace revolts.

When the Koch king under General Depu attacked the Ahom kingdom, King Hso Khan Pa entered the Naga Hills and took refuge in the hills for three months running away from his kingdom for safety of his life and his royal family. In the early part of 17th century, when the Mughuls invaded Assam and destroyed many of the villages in the plains, the Nagas extended their full co-operation to the Ahom refugees running away from the Assam valley and allowed them to take shelter within the respective village areas protecting them from the inroads of the Mughuls. The Mughuls were not allowed to come beyond the Ahom-Naga boundary. The Nagas showed their best possible co-operation and hospitality to the Ahoms giving them shelter and protection when the Ahom kingdom was attacked and devastated by the Mughuls. Dr. P. Gogoi in his book "The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms" has recorded that "in this movement, co-operation and hospitality of the Hill Tribes, particularly of the Nagas, can be well imagined..." Some other historian like Sir Jadunath Sarkar has also recognised that the Naga warriors went to the help of the Ahoms against the Mughuls and "these wild Warriors proved a new danger to the Mughuls".

Prince Gadapani ran away from Ahom Kingdom alongwith his children to escape death from the orders of the Lara Raja who wanted to disabole all the claimants to the throne. Unfortunately, Gadapani could not take his wife alongwith him and his

wife Jayamati was captured by Lara Raja's soldiers. Prince Gadapani and children were well looked after and they could move freely in Konyak and Ao areas without fear of their lives. In course of his stay in the Naga Hills, Prince Gadapani developed intimacy with some of the charming Naga belles, daughters of the Naga Chiefs. He married one beautiful Konyak belle called Watlong from Wanching village. Watlong died at Naginimara and her grave still remains covered by one stone with a hole in the centre. Naginimara was named in memory of Watlong. He married another charming and beautiful belle named Senticchila of Merinokpo village who was called Talime in Assamese and she adorned the Ahom Palace. Since prince Gadapani could not remain quiet in the lofty hills leaving his beloved wife Jayamati bearing all the cruel tortures in the hands of the Chaotangs (the King's guards), he decided to go down to the plains alongwith some of the Naga warriors of his confidence in disguise. Prince Gadapani dressed like a Konyak and went down to Jeringa field with the Naga warriors where his wife was just on the verge of death bearing the cruel torture of the Ahom soldiers. The Nagas took Gadapani near the spot where his beloved wife Jayamati was almost dying of torture. Gadapani told Jaymati to tell the Chaotangs of whereabouts of her husband and to save her life; but the indomitable spirit of Jaymati recognising the face of her husband and seeing the danger winked her eyes to be away and also told them to go away from the spot; as they were not wanted there. So Gadapani and his Naga Warriors left the place and went up to Naga Hills. But that occasion made Gadapani determined to capture the Ahom throne and he overthrew the Lara Raja later with the help of some loyal nobles in the plains. Meanwhile, there was a war between the Ahoms and the Doyang Lotha Nagas during the reign of Gadapani and he took two beautiful Naga belles to his palace to maintain the bond of friendship after the Doyang Lothas were defeated in the war.

Ever since the appointment of Kan Seng, as Barpatra Gohain, son of the Naga Chief through one of the queens, the descendants of Kan Seng proved to be the strong loyalists to the Ahom throne in many difficult periods and particularly during the various revolts against the throne. As such, the

descendants of Kan-Seng were appointed as Governors, Generals and in other high posts in the kingdom to suppress those palace revolts and to conduct wars against the enemies. In the later years, when the nobles led by Buragohain conspired against the king Shu-Jin-Pha, the Naga Barpatra Gohain, the son-in-law of Buragohain told them, "My forefathers never revolted against the king. I do not like to rise against the king" as recorded in the Ahom history. Accordingly, some other nobles under the leadership of Naga Barpatra Gohain remained loyal to the king.

Raja Joy Singh, refugee from Manipur, who ran away from Manipur took shelter in Ahom kingdom; but he was helped and protected by Ahom king and he was escorted upto Manipur by one Manmat Naga Baibaruah with a vast army. The Nagas of Manipur welcomed Raja Joy Singh in Manipur and the Burmese withdrew from Manipur seeing the vast Ahom army with Raja Joy Singh under the command of Manmat Naga Baibaruah. One Chora Konwar, son of one Ao Gohain was appointed as Bar Baruah to fight against the Muslims. He also fought against the Daflas.

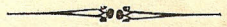
The Ahom kings always gave due priority to maintain cordial relationship with the Nagas. To facilitate such easy contact with the Nagas, the Ahom kings constructed Naga-Ali (Naga Road) at present found near Namdang Bridge in upper Assam to Nagaland. The object of construction of Naga-Ali, recorded in the history, also was to facilitate the easy movement of the Ahom kings and their nobles to visit the surrounding Naga Chiefs in the Naga Hills and also to provide easy means of escape into Naga Hills in times of danger to the throne either from the enemy attack or palace revolt. It has been remembered by the Naga Chiefs till today that during the Ahom dynasty, the Ahom kings used to invite the Naga Chiefs during the marriage ceremony and exchanged presents with the Naga Chiefs when the latter went down to attend such wedding ceremony and presented Naga costumes as token of friendship to Ahom kings. Some of the very costly articles including very old Ahom guns presented to Konyak Chiefs are still found in their possession as token of friendship. The Ahoms and the Nagas cannot forget their cordial and friendly relationship which existed during the

Ahom kings. The Naga Hills abound in thick forests always proved a safe abode for the Ahom kings, their nobles and subjects alike in times of their national defeats in the wars against the victorious enemies conquering the plains of Assam. It was often in the Naga Hills that the Ahom kings could secure safe conduct, moral and material support from the Naga Chiefs in times of their national crisis.

When the Burmese invaded Assam from 1816 to 1824, Assam was devastated and the people faced the reign of terror, insecurity of life, plunder and inhuman torture in the hands of the invading Burmese Army particularly under Burmese General Mingi Maha Bandula. The Ahoms could not live in peace in the country and as such they took the help of the East India Company from Calcutta and at the same time a vast population of the Ahoms took shelter in the Naga Hills running away from the clutches of the cruel Burmese Army. The Nagas provided shelter and protection to the Ahoms who came beyond the boundary between the Ahoms and the Nagas. This Ladoigarh is called Ali-Tsaki in Ao means Road Fence (Ali-road, Tsaki-fence) between the Ahoms and the Nagas. Seeing the

cruel atrocities committed by the Burmese Army on the Ahoms, some powerful Naga villages went down to the plains and fought against the Burmese Army. While fighting against the Burmese Army and providing shelter and protection to the good neighbours like the Ahoms, two good warriors namely Azukolok and Yangpitangnok of Meiangkong village were captured by the Burmese from the battle and taken away.

When the treaty of Yandaboo was signed on February 24, 1826 between the East India Company and His Majesty the king of Ava, the Burmese Army occupying the Ahom kingdom had to renounce all occupation claims in Assam under Article 2 of the treaty. The withdrawal of Burmese Army from Assam under the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 restored normalcy in the Assam valley. Those vast population of the Ahoms settling in the Naga Hills beyond the Ahom-Naga boundary went down to their respective villages and settled there. But some of the Ahoms permanently settled in some Naga villages and they were absorbed in the Naga community through inter-marriage.



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