

## Local Influence upon the Ahoms

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Early Ahom rulers believed in superstitions and omens. The kingship and all ranks were under the spiritual domination of a class of priests called *Deodhai*, *Mohan* and *Bailong*. The kings consulted the priests on these occasions - before waging a war, celebration of victory and coronation, worship and disposal of the dead.<sup>1</sup> The name of the principal Ahom deity was *Somdeo*. There were other deities. The first Ahom king Suka-pha (1228-1268 A. D.) when founded his capital at Charaideo (in Sibsagar Dist.) in 1253 A.D. made the place an abode of all deities under the management of priests.<sup>2</sup>

Coronation of Ahom princes known as *singhari gharutha* was an elaborate one which was performed with religious formalities. *Rikkhavan* was a formality. The procedure of *Rikkhavan* was<sup>3</sup> : "The king sat in full dress on a platform, and the Deodhai, Mohan and Bailong pandits, i.e., tribal priests and astrologers, poured holy water, purified by recitation of sacred texts over his head whence it rained down his body, through a hole in the platform onto the chief Bailong, or astrologer who was standing below. The king then changed his clothes giving these which he had been wearing and all his ornaments to the chief Bailong." *Rikkhavan* meaning long life was also observed after a success in war apart from *Singhari gharutha*. Before waging a war the kings consulted the priests for omens. This was done by examining the legs of fowls as they were superstitious and left their houses in the event of an owl or vulture perched there.<sup>4</sup> Festivals and worships were held according to religious regulations. Dead bodies of kings and their families were buried with attendants and articles of comfort at Charaideo.<sup>5</sup> During the first few centuries of their rule the Ahoms maintained purities of their socio-cultural traditions.

In 1497 king Suhungmung (1497-1539 A. D.) took the Hindu title Svarga Narayan, and laid the foundation of a convention.<sup>6</sup> His reign was also important because he introduced

the Saka Era (Hindu dating system) for government works. The Jovian Cycle or the Ahom method of calculating dates was abandoned.<sup>7</sup> The Ahom language (a branch of Tai) was current in the court. During the reign of Susengpha (1603-1641 A. D.) the appointment of Hindus to high posts was encouraged which led to the adoption of Assamese language in administrative works.<sup>8</sup> The practice of burial continued to be performed. It was during the reign of Rudra Singh (1696-1714 A. D.) that cremation was adopted for the Ahoms and burial was fully abandoned in favour of cremation during Rajesvar Singh's (1751-1761 A. D.) time.<sup>9</sup> The reign of Rudra Singh was a significant one. He had recognised a Vaisnava Gosain as his spiritual preceptor, his son and successor Sib Singh (1714-1744 A. D.) was an active patron of Sakta Hinduism and in contravention of Ahom tradition showed negligence to the worship of *Somdeo*, the principal Ahom deity.<sup>10</sup>

In the sixties of the eighteenth century there was a reaction in the Ahom community. The priests were behind this. They took a strong view to these conventions.<sup>11</sup> Evidently it was their desire to keep the Ahoms free from Hindu influences of all patterns, and not to part with their hold over state affairs. Their popular king during this transformation period was Gadadhar Singh (1681-1696 A. D.). At that time Vaisnavite Hinduism was a forceful popular creed. He was of opinion that after the norms of this creed the prohibition on eating flesh of cattle, swine, fowls and strong drinks will produce physical deterioration and not advisable for the Ahoms; he was not willing to adopt any measure which was prejudicial to Ahom traditions and priestly classes.<sup>12</sup> But this last bid of the priests *Deodhai*, *Mohan* and *Bailong* to regain their old glories met with no success due to the sober policy of Lakshmi Singh (1869-1880 A.D.). He however recognised the priestly classes in the Ahom community.<sup>13</sup>

The Ahoms were a minority group in Assam. In the thirteenth century A. D. they were only few thousands when *Sukapha* laid the foundation of their kingdom.<sup>14</sup> They were conscious of this fact. From 16th to 18th century the Ahom kings ordered as many as five censuses for verification of community wise figures of the population of Assam.<sup>15</sup> It was their policy to increase the number of Ahoms by encouraging matrimonial alliances and relations with non-Ahoms.<sup>16</sup> Hence it was also linked up with their policy to accommodate non-Ahom practices

in Ahom society. The reactions of the priestly class thus lost its ground due to disfavour of a politically conscious ruling dynasty, backed by an organised community, under the leadership of a hierarchy of nobles and loyal subjects. However they (kings) raised no question to the safe-guards of Ahom society with the priestly classes. Evidently, the assimilative tendencies played its role on the Ahom kings and the Ahom community, while they in their own turn imbibed major elements of local culture of Assam in order to fulfill their political ambitions.<sup>17</sup>

### References

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