

## Early Hinduisation of the Ruling Tribes of North-East India

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The north-eastern region of India is dominated by, since early periods, the population of various tribes. The early Assam rulers belonging to the Varmana, Salastambha and the Pala lines, whose ancestors were termed, in both literary and epigraphic records, as *Asuras* and *Mlechhas*, according to most authorities belonged to the autochthonous Bodo-Kachari tribes of non-Hindu affiliation<sup>1</sup>. Their political authority was mostly confined to the lower Brahmaputra valley and some on occasions extended to the neighbouring Bengal. The Ahoms, who were a branch of the famous Shan race, occupied the upper Brahmaputra valley by the beginning of the 13th century. When they came to this region they had their own religion other than Hinduism. The Chutiyas, who formed states in the extreme north-eastern part, had been a branch of the Tibeto-Burman stock of the greater Mongoloid race. It is possible that they formed a fraction of the Chinese extraction<sup>2</sup> of Hiuen Tsang's India. The Kacharis, who ruled over southern part of the Brahmaputra valley had been possibly the largest tribe inhabiting almost the entire lower Assam region up to North-Bengal. From what has been noted by the anthropologists<sup>3</sup>, they had, as in some cases still have, their own religious beliefs before Hinduisation. One of such tribes, who not only formed states, but also contributed towards the development of Hinduism, were the Koches who ruled in the lower Brahmaputra valley beginning from the 16th century onwards. As pointed out by D. C. Sircar and others, these Koches, previously known as the *Kambojas* or *Kuyacas*, came down from Tibet and the leaders who led the migrant hordes had Buddhism of Tibetan affiliation as their religion<sup>4</sup>. Subsequent sources<sup>5</sup> show that this ruling Tibetan tribe became gradually inclined towards Hinduism and the royal house had openly accepted it as its religion.

Thus all the ruling clans of this region were non-Aryans. Bhagadatta, the legendary king of ancient Assam, was the son of Naraka, the *Asura*, and was the captain of the *Cina-Kirata-Mleechas*<sup>6</sup>. The dynasty of Pushyavarman belonged to this clan. Salastambha was also the *Mlechhadhinatha*<sup>7</sup>; and to the same stock belonged the family of the Palas<sup>8</sup>. The Ahoms, Koches, Kacharis and the Chutiyas- all belonged to the Mongolian race<sup>9</sup>. The terms *Asura*, *Danava*, *Kirata*, *Mlechha* were applied to these early rulers and

their kinsmen by the Aryans to denote their non-Aryan tribal origin. Besides linguistic, physiological and geographical factors had also been counted to distinguish these *mlechha* people from the Aryans.<sup>10</sup> The Aryan concept of these people may be realised from what is recorded in the *Padma Purana*. The “-Mlechhas as barbarians are accustomed to eat everything ; they are idiotic and they kill cows and Brahmanas ; these other *mlechha Kuvacas* have their birth place in the hills. Their language is of *pisaca* (demoniac) character, and they have no (good) social usage.”<sup>11</sup>

While no records evidence the Hinduisation of the people, epigraphic evidence show that it began to penetrate into the royal household as early as the 4th century A. D. Specific mention in the epigraphs to some of the early rulers performing their coronation ceremonies according to the Vedic rites<sup>12</sup> prove that all rulers did not perform the ceremony according to similar rites. Such events undoubtedly refer to the beginning of Hinduisation of the non-Aryan rulers of Assam. The performance of the *Asvamedha* sacrifice and the popularity of the epithet *Maharajadhiraja Plaramesvara Paramabhattacharaka*<sup>13</sup> among these rulers point to the gradual popularity of Hinduism among them. But it is not until the time of Sankaradeva (1449 - 1569), the great 16th century reformer of Assam, that attempts had been made to Hinduise the masses. Contemporary literary records show that he brought a few tribals to his faith. Mention may be made of one Narottam, a Naga ; one Govinda, a Garo ; Paramananda, a Miri (Mishing) ; Jairam, a Bhutiya ; Narahari, an Ahom and so on<sup>14</sup>. That was, however, a mere beginning only ; the process lost intimacy after the great leader's death. The state in which the early British writers found the tribes in this region, lead us to surmise that if there was any conscious act of Hinduisation of the tribes, its extent was too limited. Such a contention may be made even at present by any acute observer. The Ahom *Buranjis* (the chronicles of the Ahom rulers) and the *Vamsavalis* (the genealogies of the Koch kings) contain innumerable references as to how the royal houses had been gradually Hinduised without their being much interested in their fellow tribes. It may be noted here that although the founder Koch king Biswa Singha (1515 - 1540) was sanctified as early as he mounted the throne, and his son Naranarayan (1540 - 1587) was a staunch supporter of Hinduism and so were his son and grandson. It was even during the rule of the great patron of Vaishnavism (i. e. Naranarayan) that almost all of his fellow kinsmen remained non-Hindu. The *Darrang Raj Vamsavali* contains suffi-

cient argument for this. The genealogy records that Naranarayan was compelled to worship the god Siva in the tribal way when, disregarding the same, the king propitiated the Brahmins before starting for the Assam (Ahom kingdom) campaign.<sup>15</sup> Besides, he was compelled to permit the tribes (Bhots, Meches, Kacharis) to practise their own tribal beliefs in the total region to the north of the *Gohain Kamal Ali*.<sup>16</sup> It therefore appears that there was almost certainly a tribal revolt against the royal house which being recently Hinduised, paid little attention to peoples' beliefs. San-karadeva's (1449 - 1569) *Bhagavatu* possesses ample evidence to the effect that the impact of Hinduism among the tribes was but very very little. The picking up of one disciple from each major tribe<sup>17</sup> to his sect is interesting. Besides, the specific mention of the *Kiratas, Kacharis, Khasis, Garos, Mikirs, Ahoms, Kuvacas, Mlechha* and so forth in the 16th century Vaishnava literature as those down-troddens who, according to the reformers, could be uplifted if they had once pronounced the name of Hari, the Hindu Supreme God,<sup>18</sup> was very apparently an encouragement to attract the tribes to Hinduism. All these imply that the process of extension of Hinduism by way of converting these people was in motion throughout the ages; but it was not intimately pursued. The Brahmin pundits who had the instrumentality of carrying on this, were usually concerned with a few - the royal clans alone. The vast masses remained outside it. While writing the *Tribal History of Eastern India*, Dalton found that almost all the tribes of the region practised their own animistic beliefs as late as the 19th century.<sup>19</sup>

Hinduisation of these tribes began as early as the Aryan migration towards the region - possibly one or two centuries before Christ. One of the principal ways was to develop a fictitious divine origin for the ruling tribes by identifying the tribal gods with those of the Hindus.<sup>20</sup> Thus for the early dynasties of Assam rulers, it was accepted that they had been descended from Lord Vishnu in his boar incarnation by the goddess earth or *Bhumi*.<sup>21</sup> The tradition ran through centuries through the *Puranas* and inscriptions. The Ahoms, when Hinduised, saw their gods and legends identified with the Hindu gods and Puranic legends "so that both the Ahoms and the masses of the Hindus were made to feel that after all; the religions and pantheons of the two peoples were essentially the same."<sup>22</sup> The Ahom kings were gradually designated by the Brahmins as *Svarga-deos* or 'Gods of heaven.' Similarly, Biswa Singha who belonged to the *Mlechhas*, was elevated to Hin-

duism immediately after the assumption of power. The *arrang Raj Vamsavali* records a tradition ascribing to him a *Kshatriya* origin and he is said to have been the son of Lord Siva and Parvati<sup>23</sup>. Similar theories have been evolved for all the ruling clans of ancient and medieval Assam. The Chutiyas and the Kacharis had their own traditional origins.<sup>24</sup> The Tezpur Grant of Harjara-varmadeva (c. 801 - 835 A. D.) records the name of Pralambha<sup>25</sup>.

The process of Hinduisation brought with it almost all sorts of Sanskritic culture, and the tribal names of the ruling princes had been gradually Sanskritised. According to Romila Thapar this brought high ritual status to the family.<sup>26</sup> Thus we find how an early Assam king and his queen adopted the names of the great Gupta ruler Samudra upta and his queen Dattadevi,<sup>27</sup> in the process of Sanskritisation. These rulers were also persuaded to patronise Sanskrit culture and learning so that they might prove themselves as good as an *Arya*.<sup>28</sup> Among the prominent early Assam rulers the name of Bhaskaravarman, who according to his own inscription<sup>29</sup> was "born to dispel the darkness", and of whose patronage of learning the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang is highly eloquent,<sup>30</sup> may be mentioned. Other such kings included the Varahi king Mahamanikya<sup>31</sup> and the Koch king Naranaryayan<sup>32</sup>. One interesting aspect of Sanskrit learning was that it was confined to the Brahmins and a few members of the aristocracy only.

The major aspect of the Hinduisation of the tribes was the economic upliftment of the *pundits*. The kings used to make land-grants to the Brahmins for the acquisition of religious merits. Beginning from the time of the Varmana rulers (c. 350- 650 A.D.), almost all the Hinduised rulers of early Assam gifted lands to the Brahmins.<sup>33</sup> Such grants usually included slaves and servants as well. Inversely, the Brahmins confined their attention to the kings and the nobles, and invented for them a noble descent with the hope of reward of lucrative posts at the court.<sup>34</sup> As a matter of fact, the masses including slaves and servants formed the working class to serve nobles and the priests for extension of agriculture in virgin lands, and thus the poor class remained backward and non-Sanskritised throughout the ages. At the same time the ruling aristocracy being elevated to high social status, formed alongwith the priestly class a unit of separate identity-completely different from the masses in taste and culture.

It is a fact that Hinduisation of the tribes is still an unending process. Any individual may call himself a Hindu after performing certain rituals. For example, a Garo can be a Koch (i.e. a Hindu)

when he uses the plough and avoids certain 'unclean' habits.<sup>35</sup> A Mishing can be a Hindu when he takes *Sarana* (asylum).<sup>36</sup> But throughout the ages, the attempt was not intimate, and the tribes, it appears, in many cases, resented Brahmanical outlook towards the so called *Mlechha-Jatis*. It may here be pointed out that some tribes of modern Chotanagpur region refer to the neighbouring Hindu non-tribals as what the Aryans used to call as *Mlechha*.<sup>37</sup> Such resentment can be seen in the records of the *Darrang Raj Vamsavali* itself as stated earlier. According to Romila Thapar such discontentment helps in "building up of tribal political movement which sought to exclude neighbours."<sup>38</sup>

From the above it may be said that Hinduisation of the north-eastern tribes began very early. But it was confined to a very limited section, the princes and nobles alone; the masses remained outside it. This created an aristocracy of the kings, nobles and priests-culturally and economically advanced. If by way of land-grants there was agricultural expansion, that expansion was for the landed class alone. It is thus the social status, ritual superiority and economic strength and above all political power remained with the former so that Sankaradeva proposed only to enlighten the masses.<sup>40</sup> But the major element, as pointed out by Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Hinduisation brought with it, was the ritualistic caste system based on the *varna* and *jati* procedure of the Aryans.<sup>1</sup> It is however, to be admitted that Hinduisation of the tribes, although confined to a very limited section, opened the way for the non-Hindu tribes to think for their gradual up-liftment.

### Notes & References

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3. For example see E. T. Dalton, *Tribal History of Eastern India*, Reprint, Delhi, 1978, pp. 82 ff.
4. D. C. Sircar, 'The Kamboja Kings of Bengal' in *Abhinandan Bharati*, Gauhati, 1982, p. 110; D. Nath, *A History of the Koch Kingdom (c. 1515 - 1516)*, (MS), Dibrugarh University Ph. D. Thesis.
5. *The Dinajpur Stone Pillar Inscription* (see R. P. Chanda, *JASB*, 1911, Vol. VIII, pp. 618 f.).

6. Chatterji, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
7. See the *Bargaon Grant* of Ratnapala, v. 9. see M. M. Sharma, *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Gauhati University, 1978, p.156.
8. *The Bargaon Grant*, v. 10, *ibid.* 9. Chatterji, *op. cit.*
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11. Cf. Chatterji, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
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16. *Ibid.* vv. 333-338. 17. See fn. No. 14.
18. Madhavadeva's *Namghosha*, vv. 473, 501 ; Sankaradeva's *Bhagayata. II*, v. 474 ; Neog, *op. cit.*, pp. 75, 369. 19. *Op. cit.*
20. S. K. Chatterji, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization in India*, Gauhati University, 1970, p. 18. 21. *Ibid.*
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25. V. 7, Sharma, *op. cit.*, p. 97. 26. *op. cit.*, p. 172.
27. P. C. Choudhury, *The History of the Civilization of the People of Assam*, Gauhati, 1966, p. 131. 28. Thapar, *op. cit.*, p. 172.
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35. D. N. Majumdar, 'A Study of Tribe-Caste Continuum and the Process of Sanskritization among the Bodo-speaking Tribes of the Garo Hills' in K. S. Singh, (ed), *Tribal Situation in Inaia*, Vol. 13, Simla, 1972, pp. 267 f.
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