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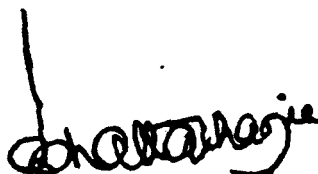
PREFACE

It is my pleasure to introduce the Proceedings of the Fourth Session of the North East India History Association held at the Union Christian College, Barapani on December 19-21, 1983. Dr. S. K. Barpujari, Senior Research Fellow, Indian Council of Historical Research and formerly Reader in History, Gauhati University, presided over the Session which was inaugurated by Dr. B.D. Sharma, Vice-Chancellor, North-Eastern Hill University. Shri S. K. Austin John, Principal, Union Christian College did us a great honour as Local Secretary for the Session.

We are grateful to the authorities of the Union Christian College and the members of its History faculty for inviting the Session and the generous hospitality offered to the delegates. It was indeed an experiment to hold a session in a college, which has been a privilege of the Universities for similar organisations. The success of the session has greatly inspired the sister institutions and the organisers for the future. The entire college community, including the teachers, students and the residents of the beautiful campus have contributed to this grand success.

This volume contains papers that were presented at the Barapani Session. The summaries received before 30 November 1983 were published in the Abstracts of Papers volume which was distributed at the Session. I am thankful to the members of the editorial committee, Mr. Shyamadas Bhattacharyya, Dr. G. P. Singh and Dr. Milton S. Sangma for their help in editing the papers.

It is gratifying to note that the Proceedings volumes of our earlier sessions have been well received in the academic circles, and I am confident the readers shall find considerable new materials and fresh approaches for studies in the History of North East India in this volume also.



Shillong

The 25 October, 1984

(J. B. Bhattacharjee)

General Secretary

North East India History Association

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Bodo-Ahom Relations (1200-1536 AD): A Political Study

Debasis Sen

In the annals of mediaeval Assam an important point of significance is the struggle between the Bodos and the Ahoms for political predominance. Designated by tribal and local names such as Bodo-Kacharis, Meches, Tipperahs, Chutiyas, Dimasas, Morans and Varahis, the Bodos were a formidable ethnic group under their chiefs and traditional ruling families¹. The Ahoms, a distinct branch of the Tai race, entered Assam deserting their small principality in Northern Burma and laid the foundation a powerful kingdom in the thirteenth century A.D. The cradle of Tai civilisation in Asia was Yunnan in the south-east of China. There was a Tibeto-Burman (possibly Bodo) state in the immediate neighbourhood of Yunnan many years before the migration of Tai groups to Burma and Thailand³. Hence the Bodos were not unknown to the Ahoms before their advent into Assam. Samlungpha, the brother of a king of Mungmanu or Pong (name of a Shan kingdom in Burma) is said to have defeated the Chutiyas and the Tipperahs according to the Shan chronicles. This incident had taken place before the foundation of the Ahom Kingdom in Assam⁴. The Shans and the Ahoms are closely related branches of the Tai; their only point of difference is that while the former were animists, the later were adherents to Hinduism and trace their ancestry from Lengdon (Indra, the Hindu God).⁵ The Ahom branch proved its worth in Assam while the Shan establishments (whatever) disappeared gradually. The first three hundred years of Ahom rule witnessed the gradual disappearance of the Bodos from the field of political activities. One after another, the Bodo principalities submitted to the Ahom State. This process continued till 1535 AD, when the mightiest Bodo state of Assam -the Dimasa kingdom of Dimapur was destroyed by the Ahom troops. The present paper proposes to discuss the Bodo-Ahom relations in this context with the aid of primary sources.

The Bodo-Kacharis and Meches were among the powerful

ethnic groups under their chieftains in Ancient Assam. In the eighth century AD a Mech chief usurped the throne of Kamrupa (Assam), when Bhaskaravarman, the illustrious king died leaving no heir. This Mech chief is referred to as "Mlechhadhinatho" in the Bargaon Grant of Ratnapala⁶. "Mlechhadhinatho" means Lord of the Mlechhas (Non-Aryans), a Sanskritised form of Mech. When Muhammad Bakhtiyar invaded Kamatapur Kingdom in the beginning of the thirteenth century AD, the Meches helped him as soldiers in the Muhammedan troops⁷. In the Kapili Valley in Nowgong there were principalities of the Tipperahs. The Tipperah principality known as Trivega, first shifting the venue of its capital from Kapili Valley to a place known as Kholongma in Cachar district, finally moved to Tripura where they established their kingdom around fourteenth century AD⁸. The Morans and Varahis (tribes allied to the Bodos) of the districts of Dibrugarh and Sib-sagar then held suzerainties in smaller territories.⁹ One person, Birpal by name, claiming descent from the Hindu traditional king Bhismak, united the Bodos of the north-east Assam and laid the foundation of the powerful Chutiya Kingdom in Sadiya in the twelfth century AD¹⁰. This coincided with the birth of the Dimasa kingdom in the Dhansiri Valley, which had gone down in history as the mightiest Bodo State of Assam. Besides, in the territory stretching from Kapili Valley to Sadiya there were a number of petty chiefs with semi-independent status.

Sukapha, the chief of the Ahoms, was prudent enough to realise the possibility of a concerted Bodo reaction against his designs in Assam. Determined to prevent such a course of events he improved his position by defeating Nagas of the Indo-Burma frontier and established his authority at Namrup.¹² From Namrup he reached Tipam following the downstream of the Dihing, stayed there for a short time and reached at Moonkloong Chekru (Abhayapur) where he remained for years but due to unfavourable climate and monsoon left this place for Habong in the neighbourhood; this place too was unsuitable for cultivation and so he shifted his establishments on the bank of the Dikhow where he found powerful Bodo groups in his vicinity.¹³ There were at least 12,000 Bodos belonging mostly to the Chutiyas and the Sadiyal Kacharis (Sadiyal Kacharis are so-called because they had a petty principality in Sadiya). They were identical with the Chutiyas.¹⁴ Conscious of his own status and strength he took recourse to diplomatic methods and turned his attention to the Varahis and Morans, the tribes allied to the Bodos without taking the risk of a direct hostility

with more formidable Bodo groups. Varahi chief Thakumta, and Badancha, the chief of the Morans, submitted to him. A fair number of their clansmen were upgraded to the level of the victors by the liberal grants of Ahom social ranks and were accommodated within the concepts of Ahom aspirations in Assam.¹⁵ This policy of Sukapha was highly successful and is a clue to his statesmanship. This is evident from the fact that in C. 1250 AD in the Varahi capital at Charaideo, Sukapha established the first capital of the Ahoms amidst their support.¹⁶

The emergence of the Ahoms as a powerful force after the foundation of their capital at Charaideo was an event of significance in the history of mediaeval Assam. Apparently, in status their position became something like that of a challenger to the indigenous traditional dynasties- the Chutiyas of Sadiya and the Dimasas of the south-east, the formidable exponents of Bodo aspirations in Assam. Sukapha's contemporary Chutiya king was Ratnadhvaj Pala. He was an ally of Prithu, the Hindu ruler of Kamatapur and the Muhamedan Sultan of Bengal and therefore in the mid-thirteenth century AD he was far more superior to his Ahom counter part.¹⁷ However, certain sources state that Sukapha obtained a victory over the Chutiyas, but this added no territorial gains to the Ahoms as it appears from the sources.¹⁸ It, therefore, appears that the Chutiyas were on the offensive, and this attitude continued till the first quarter of the sixteenth century AD.

Chutiya King Dhir Narayan invaded the Ahom territories but the Ahom King Suhungmung Dihingia Raja (1497-1539 AD) again defeated them.¹⁹ The struggle went on. In 1523 AD. Suhungmung Dihingia Raja invaded Sadiya. In the final phase of this struggle the last Chutiya king Nitipal fought with the Ahom troops inside the capital with his one hundred and twenty wives and committed suicide with the principal queen.²⁰ The whole Chutiya country was annexed to the Ahom territories. An Ahom officer known as Sadiya Khowa Gohain was posted at Sadiya for the administration of this possession.²¹

In South-east, the Dimasa kingdom in Dimapur maintained its sovereign authority in the Dhansiri Valley upto 1536 AD. When Sukapha was consolidating his resources in Upper Assam, large number of Sadiyal Kacharis (stated before) failing to identify themselves with the Chutiyas gradually moved to the south-east and joined the Dimasas in the Dhansiri Valley.²² This had added strength to the Dimasa State. The Ahoms were practical enough not to challenge them in any manner. They turned their atten-

tion to the west i.e. the Kingdom of Kamatapur where the Bodos were not less powerful ethnic groups under the Hindu rulers.²³ The Dimasas had failed to cope with the advanced diplomatic talents of the Ahoms and so, despite the decisive numerical superiority and better organisations the Ahoms remained unchallenged by them. Towards the close of the fifteenth Century AD. when the Ahoms established themselves firmly in Upper Assam, the Dimasas became the targets of their aggrandisements. War broke out sometime after 1490 AD. The Ahom King Supimpha (1493-1497 AD) was himself present in the field to watch the mode of warfare. After a severe encounter he with his commander escaped from the battle field leaving behind the corpses of an Ahom officer and one hundred and twenty soldiers slain by the Dimasa warriors.²⁴ When the Dimasas were sure of their success their king surrendered himself at the smiling face of an Ahom maiden. The Ahom king purchased his friendship by offering him a girl, Jekhring by name, along with a male elephant and twelve female slaves and thereby the Dimasas were halted from following up their success.²⁵ Thus was faded out the last chance of the Dimasas and thereafter good luck deserted them. Struggle for power went on and by 1525-26 AD. tensions reached its peak. Provocative activities on both sides precipitated a crisis in 1531 AD. Hostilities commenced after a Dimasa raid in the Ahom territory. An Ahom troop was sent at once to punish the Dimasas and they were surprised while garrisoned in the outskirts of Dimapur in course of which a number of Ahom soldiers were killed²⁶. At this stage the Ahoms retaliated by a counter offensive and penetrated into the interior of Dimapur. The reigning king Khunkhara fled away and escaped to Burma leaving his capital at the mercy of the Ahoms.²⁷ The throne became vacant and this offered the victors opportunity to intervene in the affairs of the Dimasa political organisation for the first time.

The Ahoms placed a new king on the Dimasa throne at Dimapur on subordinate terms. Name of this king was Detsung, a relative of the former king Khunkhara. Once placed on the throne by the generosity of the Ahoms, Detsung ultimately proved himself ungrateful and over ambitious. He embroiled himself in the conflicts between the Muhammedan Sultans of Bengal and Ahoms when the former offered him a beautiful princess to be his chief consort. This episode was responsible for the Muhammedan invasion of Assam led by Turbak a general of the Sultan of Bengal.²⁸ Suhungmung Dihingia Raja (1497-1531 AD) became angry by this

high-handedness of Detsung and he at once sent a punitive expedition to Dimapur. In 1536 AD. poor Detsung along with his family members was slain by the Ahom troops and his capital was ransacked.²⁸ Dimasas deserted Dimapur and organised themselves in Maibong on the bank of the Mahur river in North Cachar hills.³⁰ Once again the victors got a desired opportunity to dictate terms and conditions of peace to the vanquished, and this time they did it with a little severity.

The Semphong or the tribal council at this stage settled the terms of peace with the Ahoms. The question of succession got prime importance and this was settled by the installation of Madan Konowar, the son of Susuddhi (name of the beautiful lady of Bengal as stated above) and Detsung, as the new king of the Dimasas at Maibong. Madan ascended the throne taking up the title Nirbhoy Narayan, a title offered to him by the Ahom king Suhungmung Dihingia Raja.³¹ He was called 'Thapita Sanchita' meaning established and preserved by the Ahoms. According to the terms of the Thapita Sanchita, the Dimasa king was asked to pay an annual tribute of two horses to the Ahom king and seven to nobles, besides he was to send an annual courtesy envoy to the Ahom Court.³² The principle of Thapita Sanchita remained as the basis of the future relations between the Dimasas and the Ahoms. Whenever there was disrespect to this traditional term on either side there was tension, hostility and war.

The Ahom policy was consistent to the Bodos. It has been stated before that they first turned their arms against the Hindu rulers of Kamatapur who were the overlords of the Bodos of the Western districts of Assam, viz. Goalpara and Kamrup. Here Ahom diplomacy was confronted with a similar design of the Muhamedans of Bengal. When Sudangpha (1397-1407 AD.) was the Ahom king he sent an expedition to expel the Muhamedans from Kamatapur and met with great success.³³ In these conflicts Kamatapur gradually became weak and disappeared from the political map. The Bodos of the region thereafter were thrown in the lap of Biswa Singha, the founder of the Koch kingdom in North Bengal.³⁴ The reduction of the Dimasa kingdom into a status of vassalage in 1536 AD was a high water mark of Ahom policy, and thereafter the relations between the Bodos and the Ahoms in Assam became that of subjects and overlord, at least theoretically.

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