

INTRODUCTION

The concept :

The word acculturation was widely accepted among American anthropologists as a concept referring to those changes set in motion by the coming together of societies with different cultural conditions (International Encyclopaedia Of the Social Sciences, Vol.1:21-6,1968). This field of investigation was generally referred to by British anthropologists as 'culture contact'. A persistent usage gave the term the meaning of cultural assimilation, or replacement of one set of cultural traits by another, as in references to individuals in contact situation, as more or less 'accultured'.

It developed as an area of anthropological inquiry in 1880s and became a major field of investigation. It appeared first in the writings of the North Americans like W.H Holmes (1886), Franz Boas (1896) and W.J McGee (1898). McGee spoke of 'piratical acculturation' and 'amicable acculturation' meaning transfer and adjustment of customs and condition of contacts between peoples of 'lower-grades' and 'higher-grades' respectively, whereas Boas used it in more general sense to refer to those derived processes of change as a result of which the culture of a region —

becomes similar to one another. Boas's usage gained some support from the German ethnologists like Ehrenreich (1905) and Krickeberge (1910).

Later the North American anthropologists concerned themselves increasingly with studying the phenomena of cultural change resulting from contact between peoples. Initial studies were directed towards the construction of dead cultures as evident from Lewis' (1935) intensive study of Crow Indian culture of the buffalo period. From 1930 onwards, attention shifted to the firsthand observation of the contact between Indians and Anglo Americans and between native Africans and Europeans. Studies like "Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe" by Margaret Mead (1932) and "Reaction to conquest" by Monica Hunter Wilson (1936), among the Pondo and other natives of South Africa were worth mentioning.

Studies by some contemporary scholars like Herskovits (1927), Redfield (1929), Lesser (1933), Schapera (1934), and Spier (1935) made acculturation studies an important interest of anthropologists. A strong thrust could be seen in 1935 when a committee under the chairmanship of Robert Redfield prepared a memorandum called "Outline for the study of Acculturation" (Redfield, Linton and Herskovits 1935). The committee sought to define the field that was —

coming to be called as 'acculturation'—and to provide a checklist of topics concerning which data should be gathered if the phenomena defined were to be systematically investigated.

This effort gave birth to a working definition of it which is as follows :

"Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous firsthand contact with subsequent changes in the original cultural pattern of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton and Herskovits 1936:149).

Efforts were made to identify types and situation of contact, process, psychological mechanism and results. The processes of 'determination', 'selection', and 'integration' were identified respectively, those resulting in the presentation of traits by a 'donor-group' in contact situation, the accepting of traits by a 'receiving group' and 'reaction' recognized the replacement of cultural elements, combination of elements into new wholes, and rejection of elements. All these features, later, became the basis of analysis of acculturation phenomena. In other words "acculturation" was more or less reciprocal, but incomplete. Each people was also likely to be developing new peculiarities even while it was taking over culture from the other" (Kroeber, 1948/1972 : 428-29).

Acculturation and Diffusion :

Acculturation as a concept to study cultural change might at times be seen similar to diffusion. Over the years, diffusion came to mean the analysis of similarities and differences between existing non-literate, and in this sense non-historic cultures. The contacts that presumably took place between peoples had to be constructed, and the reshaping of the borrowed elements inferred from the variations in their forms as manifest in one culture after another. Acculturation, on the other hand, was applied chiefly to instances where transmission of cultural elements could be more fully documented either by study on the spot, or by the use of documentary data, or both. In summary, then, diffusion was the study of achieved cultural transmission; while acculturation was the study of cultural transmission in process (Herskovits 1964:170).

Diffusion studies, by and large, assumed that the contacts had taken place between peoples because of the similarities observed between their cultures at the time they were studied. The reconstruction of the processes, by means of which transmission was made, thus became possible by drawing inference from the nature of the materials. Studies on acculturation, however, had the benefit of historic facts that were known or could be obtained. In most cases,

acculturation research dealt with contacts in the contemporary period. The conditions antecedent to the contact could thus be discovered, the pre-contact cultures of the people party to it could be ascertained, and the present condition of the cultures set down. In some cases, even the personalities involved in influencing the acceptance or rejection of varied elements could be reached. Where documentation was necessary, the welding of ethnographic and historical materials was a matter of cross-disciplinary research, which had given rise to a special technique called the ethnohistorical method (Herskovits 1964:171).

In acculturation studies, 'contacts' with the other cultures set the process of cultural-transmission on; and as such, types of contacts between peoples differed in many respects.

1. Contacts may occur between entire populations, or substantial segments of these populations.
2. They may arise from contact between smaller groupings or even individuals.
3. It may be a hostile contact between groups.
4. Between groups of equal or different population sizes.
5. Between groups that differ in the complexity of their material and non-material culture, or the receiving group achieves its contact with new culture in a new habitat.

6. There may be 'contact' through an intermediary group playing the role of 'bridge' or 'buffer' or both at different times between two powerful groups.
7. The 'contact' may not be necessarily continuous and first hand as perceived by Redfield et al.

Acculturation and the Ahoms :

The Ahoms of Assam seemed to fit into the 3rd and 5th types of contact situations. That acculturation is a two way process was beautifully exemplified by the Ahoms who by the first quarter of 13th century had left their original habitat in Yunan, organized themselves politically around 1228 A.D. in Assam. They had tremendous ability of assimilating their neighbours. This was borne out by the chronicles that many a tribe like the Naga, Moran, Barahi, Chutiya, and Kachari were 'assimilated' widely with the Ahom social organization and thus the terms like "Chutiya-Ahom", "Barahi-Ahom", "Kachari-Ahom", "Moran-Ahom", "Naga-Bailung" and "Miri-Sandique", came into being. The process could be called as 'Ahomization' as often referred to by Phukan (1968) and Guha (1987).

In course of time, arising from their new contacts, many changes took place within their culture leading

towards the process of Hinduization that started during the reign of king Sui-dang-pha (Bamuni Konwar 1337-1407), and got accelerated when king Suhummung (1497-1539) brought under his territory the kingdom of the Hinduized Chutiyas and the present district of Nowgong ruled by the Bara-Bhuyans. The shunning of beef eating, giving up of the pile-house for mud-plinth house, forsaking burial practice and accepting the practice of cremation, to mention a few, are the resultant changes that had occurred.

Indira Barua's (1978) work to some extent could be treated as an acculturation study on the Ahoms, though she dealt more with ethnographic data than historical one. All through her thesis she seemed to have tried to see 'Tainess' standing distinctively unique and 'to be Tai' as persisting but latent urge within the community. Her thesis overlooked the possibility of a shift within 'Tainess' in course of such a long historical past.

Rai Sahib Golap Chandra Barua (1930) gave a descriptive account of Tai Ahoms from the earliest time to the end of Ahom rule.

Lila Gogoi (1961) gave a beautiful description of Ahoms vis-a-vis Assamese culture. He dealt with the Ahom's contribution towards the formation of greater Assamese society.

Gogoi again (1985) textualized an outline of Tai Ahom culture in detail. The book was a valuable source of information on Ahom culture from 'historical perspective'.

Jotin Borgohain (1989) dealt with the Ahoms in the history of Assamese culture. R. Buragohain (1988) examined the course of Ahom state formation in mediaeval North-east India. Gohain examined a number of theories in the formation of a state. Gohain (1986) dealt with the social stratifications in the Ahom state formation. In the year 1987, he presented a paper on Brahminical influence in the formation of the Ahom state. Gohain (1993) presented another paper on Integration and inter-ethnic relations in the Ahom state of mediaeval Assam.

K.C. Phukan (1989) presented a paper on Organization of the villages under the Ahom rule. Mumtaza Khatun (1981) wrote about The marriage relations of the Ahom rulers with the neighbouring ruling families, and Debasish Sen (1985) presented a paper on Local influence upon the Ahoms.

Sir Edward Gait (1984) presented a brief political history on Ahoms. He devoted a few pages on the issues like The Rise Of The Ahom Kingdom to The Decay And Fall Of The Ahom Kingdom and The Ahom System Of Government (page 70-246).

Padmeswar Gogoi's (1968) work presented a detail account of their migrational history.

Amalendu Guha (1987) made an inquiry into the Ahom state formation in Medieval Assam where he talked about the Ahoms mode of production which led to the generation of surplus which in turn was responsible for the formation of the state.

Laksmi Devi (1968) made a political study of the Ahoms and their relations with other tribes of the region. In her book, she dealt with the Ahom administrative policies towards the neighbouring tribes during the six hundred years of the Ahom rule in Assam.

B.J Terwiel (1980:vol I&II) gave a detail account of the Tai culture with comparative case studies on other South-east Asian Tais. Terwiel here cited mostly the Khamyangs, Phakeys and Khamtis of Assam and his treatment of the Ahoms was inadequate.

P.C Chowdhury (1966) in his The History Of Civilization Of The People Of Assam To The Twelfth Century A.D., wrote a few lines on the Ahoms.

S.K Chatterjee (1950:33/55-60) devoted a few pages on Ahoms where he wrote that "...They cultivated their language and wrote Buranjis or chronicles in them, a practice which they continued in Assamese after they abandoned Ahom for Assamese". And "...In their political history and their achievements (successful resistance to the Muslims from the west) the Ahoms formed a most important and powerful Indo-mongoloid group in North-eastern India" (ibid:33). He further wrote :

"...The Chutiyas had probably been receiving earlier Thai or Ahom immigrants from the east, and they had become considerably intermixed with them.....They and the other Bodo tribe of the Morans, living by the Dibru river, were conquered by the Ahoms; and the Chutiyas were to some extent absorbed by the Ahoms. The Ahoms, it would appear, were forced to take wives from among their Bodo subjects, and it is thus likely that they approximated more and more with original people. But it was certainly a clear indication of their being a real Herrenvolk in Assam, that they were able to keep their institutions intact, and even to improve them, and held on to their language for five centuries" (ibid:56).

B.K Kakati (1972:3) pointed out that "...Asama, peerless, may be a sanskritization of some earlier formation like Acham. In Tai (Ahom), Cham means to be defeated, and with the prefix 'A', the formation 'Asam' would mean undefeated. The word 'Asama', first given to the Shans (Ahoms), was later on applied to the country".

S.N Sarma (1966) while dealing with Neo-Vaisnavism mentioned about acceptance and rejection of various forms of Hinduism among the Ahom monarchs .

A. Barua's (1989) article on 'Religious outlook of the Ahoms' presented an idea about their selective adherence to a particular sub-sect of the Hinduism.

Scope of the study :

The above mentioned studies, barring one or two, were mostly historical in nature. Indira Barua's (1978) work was, by and large, an ethnographic account of a village community. Other studies on Ahoms were on political history of the Ahom kingdom. A few of them were devoted to the Tai culture which the Ahoms had brought with them. Very few works dealt with social and cultural change among the Ahoms in a contemporary situation and there was also much less dealing with the issues as to what they retained, what they adopted, what they modified and what they invented in their culture. Each of these issues raised a number of related issues of which their existence as a group was of primary interest to them. Moreover, the domain of cultural change was a vast field of study and the question of cultural change as such, inspite of enormous literature on the subject, remained a perennial question. It was so because of the fact that the problem of change as a process was practically beyond the perception of any time framework.

In the case of the Ahoms acculturation was very important factor. As they came in contact with numerous cultures, both while they were nomadic and also when they settled down. Such contacts undoubtedly made serious impact

on their way of life, some of which they resisted and some were incorporated in their style of life.

Considering the above, it was felt necessary to project the imagination on the contemporary Ahom situation. We propose the following hypothesis to examine the same:

"...In course of their long history the Ahoms synthesized a new culture, in which most of the old values were retained in new forms".

Objective :

In the light of the above discussion, our objective in the present study was to examine the contemporary situation of the Ahoms in a village in the context of the overall history of the Ahoms, and also the contacts which brought about cultural changes within the group.

DISCUSSION

So far in our journey through the history of Ahoms to the contemporary Tai-Ahom society in Lakhimpukhuri we have seen Ahoms in two distinct socio-cultural situations :

1. The Ahom situation through history, and
2. The contemporary Ahom situation.

Here, we make an attempt to give a review on continuity and change among the Ahoms in different contact situations.

The Ahom situation through history :

It is an established fact that this great mongoloid Tai-race, the Ahoms, have, when entered Assam in the year 1228 A.D., been a culturally distinct group. Their situation at that point in history must have been somewhat hesitant. They must have been constantly looking for a new home to establish themselves in the alien country. It is also evident from their history that they came along with 9000 men, women and children who belonged to seven clans (*sat-gharia Ahom*, Barua 1978:18). These seven clans with their fellow members formed the foundation of Ahom social organization in Assam.

Gradually, with their skill in the art of wet-rice cultivation (Buragohain 1988:119) they started their first sedentary life at Charaideo in the present district of Sibsagar. For a long time they maintained a ^{low profile} but fought vehemently as and when required.

As seen in our earlier chapters, the group had tried to maintain strict endogamy although at times deviating from this rule by marrying women from outside the group. Clan exogamy was the basic rule of marriage. This is evident from the fact that even among the affluent Ahom commoners who enjoyed special status according to their birth looked only for Ahom boys for their daughters but their sons could marry any women from other groups (Gogoi 1985:99).

This suggested that there was much laxity in the marriage rules on one side, i.e., when one marries in. As long as one avoids one's own clan, there is no breach of marriage rule. This also suggested that such an originally small group had no other choice but to marry outside the group so as to avoid incest.

The above discussions reveal that praxis overrides tradition, or there seems to be an inner conflict of tradition. Tradition as we view :

"...as the way society formulates and deals with the basic problems of human existence", therefore, cannot leave a culture to die

out. ... Tradition is, therefore, and has to be bound up with the ever-shifting present (Heesterman 1972:97). Here the patrilinearity of the group becomes prominent and strikes an equilibrium in the Ahom social structure. Hence the Ahoms always looked for a *jatua-Ahom* (Ahom by birth) for their daughters and any woman for their sons.

Nevertheless, the marriage policy of the Ahoms brought about a change in the traditional Ahom society.

For instance, Guha observes that :

"Ahoms, Morans, Borahis and Chutiyas had all been undergoing a process of merger into a larger community through free inter-marriages and the ongoing acculturation for so many centuries. In that process all the four tribes had lost their separate identities even before their coming into the fold of Hinduism" (Guha 1983:44. Cited in Buragohain 1988:105)

Although the Ahom society was politically organized into two distinct classes - the ruler and the ruled in course of time new administrative posts were created and officials other than the Ahoms were also recruited. This too brought about a change in the social structure for these members gradually started identifying themselves as Ahoms - a process which Phukan (1968) and Guha (1987) refer to as *Ahomization*. Moreover,

...the centralized authority and feudal type of administration provided the ground to accommodate the culturally diverse groups within a single political (economic) system (Buragohain 1988:107).

Once again the traditional social structure based on seven clans (*Phaid*) got disintegrated due to the centralized administration, and a wide gap between the royal clans and Ahom commoners emerged which of course got filled up with newly inducted officials from other groups. Such a change was eventually justified as 'essential' for a better solidarity and smooth administration of the state. But the conflict remained unresolved, although a 'dynamic-equilibrium' (Person 1961) was attained.

Secondly, the Ahom religion was identical with most of the local populations (who were also animist) and that gave an easy access to both the parties to be assimilated. The use of Assamese language as a means of communication made things easier and the then Ahom social system admitted no restrictions or taboos on commensality and connubium (Bhuyan 1962:132) which had made social integration smooth and simple. The 'hydraulic culture' (Buragohain 1988:116) of Ahom society based on feudal administration and control over cultivatable land also brought about a hierarchical interdependence within the Ahom social structure. This brought a functional integration among all the commoners in general, irrespective of caste, creed and community under one category of *paik* forming a *got* and a *khel*. This further stratified the traditional Ahom society internally.

Later the Ahoms came in contact with the Hindus in a dramatic way. It so happened that between the years 1389 and 1397, after the assassination of the king Tyaokhamthi (1380-1389), there was no suitable successor to the throne, and the great nobles ruled the country without a king. Few years later, Thao Cheokan came across a young boy in a Brahmin family at Habung who, on further inquiry, was confirmed to be the son of Tyaokhamthi from his younger queen who was placed on a raft to drift under the orders of the two elder queens for a charge framed against her. The queen was rescued by a Brahmin, when she delivered a son and died (Gait 1984:82).

The boy came to be known as Sudangpha and became the king in 1397. He was also popularly known as Brahmin prince. It was Sudangpha who installed the old Brahmin as his confidential adviser. Under his influence many Hindu rites and ceremonies began to be observed in the palace (ibid:83).

Interestingly at then these Hindu rites and rituals were observed only within the royal palace. The king was not converted into Hinduism, he was merely positively inclined towards Hinduism. The Ahom commoners were least affected by the tenets of Hindu philosophy. Presumably, the

commoners were following the traditional Tai religion as their history is, as usual, silent.

Later, when Susenpha (1439-1488) became the king he too was inclined towards Hinduism and particularly towards the saivic cult. He was perhaps a believer of either *Siva* (a Hindu God) or *Burhagosain* (a kirata God) and constructed a temple dedicated to *Nagashankar* (Gogoi 1985:55).

By then there was an increasing influence of the Brahmins and in 1497 when Suhungmung (1497-1539) became the king, he assumed the Hindu title of *Svarga Narayan*. Since then *Svarga Deva*, a variant of *Svarga Narayan*, became the designation by which the Ahom kings described themselves in their official document (Gait 1984:86). It was during the reign of Sukhampha (1552-1603) that the Ahom king for the first time started consulting Hindu astrologers along with their own Deodhai-Bailung. It is recorded in the history that during the famous Saraighat war, cannons were fired only at the time stipulated by the Hindu astrologers (Gogoi 1985:99).

Hindu influence got more intensified during the reign of Pratap Singha (1603-1641). He came to be known as *Buddhi-Svarga-Narayan Pratap Singha*. It was Pratap Singha who brought about a revolutionary change in Ahom diplomatic

structure by installing 16 Brahmin families as diplomats. It was Pratap Singha again who on the advice of Brahman pundits released two gold coins as Buddhi-Svaraga-Narayan and Svarga-narayan respectively. Sakti in the form of Durga (Mother Goddess) came to be propitiated in the royal family during his reign.

So far we have observed that religious affiliation of the kings coupled with the installation of non-Ahoms to certain key posts in administrative structure apparently did not influence the social life of the Ahom commoners, but at the same time it had, for sure, an impact on traditional Ahom social structure. For instance, official rank, responsibilities, were mostly according to one's birth in a particular Ahom clan. The entry of non-Ahoms to these posts which were hitherto hereditary further stratified the Ahom society. This also paved the way for the dilution of clan based Ahom society to the lineage based one (which we shall deal with later). The strength of this statement lies on the 'assumption' that perhaps the hierarchical and functional interdependence that operated within the seven clans of the Ahoms was gradually becoming weak. Moreover, the establishment of new *khels* and reorganization of villages dispersed the Ahom commoners to the new villages along with other non-Ahoms which resulted in a heterogeneous village community.

By then, the Neo-Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva was gaining much strength and popularity among the masses in spite of much restrictions imposed by the Ahom court. It was during the reign of Sukhampha (1552-1603) and Pratap Singha (1603-1641) that a large majority of Sankaradeva's disciples got divided into the four *Samhatis* and a number of *Satras* came into being. The erstwhile concept - "King's religion is the citizen's religion" started diluting.

Yet another contact situation emerged when Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism under four *Samhatis* started getting royal patronage. Jayadhwaj Singha (1641-1644) was the first king to be initiated to a Vaishnavism. He started the official rule of issuing *Devottor*-land grant to the *satras* by inscribing on a copper plate. The king got so engrossed in his newly adapted religious philosophy that when Mirjumla took the Ahom capital Garhgaon by surprise, a fisher-woman was reported to have told him that if, for the last twenty years, the king had cared to pile twenty lumps of earth, he could have raised a barricade big enough to resist the Muhammadans (Gogoi 1985:56). This was clearly a sense of discontentment among the commoners created by the negligence of the king towards the affairs of the state. The Ahom priestly clans, Deodhai-Bailungs were equally offended.

Otherwise. From Udyaditya Singh (1669-1673)

to Sulikpha (1678-1681), all the kings were the disciples of one *Satra* or the other. Gradually, besides the royal clans, the Ahom commoners started getting initiated into Vaisnavism. This marked the beginning of a conscious change in traditional Tai-Ahom beliefs and practices. Although until the reign of Gadadhar Singh (1681-1696) both the royal families and the commoners openly followed dual religious practices - the traditional Tai-Ahom practices and the Neo-vaisnavism. This further divided the Ahoms into four endogamous groups based on their religious affiliation to *Brahma*, *Kala*, *Nika*, and *Purusha-samhatas*.

The contemporary Ahom Situation :

So far we have examined the possible historical contact situations that brought about the process of acculturation among the Tai-Ahoms of Assam in a wider perspective. In the following discussion, we shall try to narrow down our discussion on acculturation and focus it on the village Lakhimpukhuri in an attempt to examine the impact of those historical processes from the contemporary perspective.

The village has experienced all the above mentioned historical forces in the past (see chapter IV) and

the present day situation in the village is the cumulative result of all those forces.

The present population of 468 members with 75 households are the descendants of 15 original households (genealogies attached in appendix) which were established after the Mayamoria Rebellion in 1782, during the reign of Gaurinath Singh (1780-1795) for agricultural purposes. Thus the village community began as a single functional unit although the group was already divided according to their adherence to different sects of Vaisnavism.

Today the village is divided into two religious orders - *Brahma-Samhati* and *Kala-Samhati*, each affiliated to two different *Satras* - Dakhinpat and Bareghar *Satra* respectively.

Within the village, a villager relates himself to several classes of kinsmen beyond his immediate families. His most frequent interaction is usually with those families close to him in patrilineal descent and in residence, a group that may be called a 'localized lineage' (Mandelbaum 1970:134). The men are brothers who have set up separate households or the sons of brothers or patrilineal cousins. All the members in these households, including wives and

children are considered part of the group even though they are of different patrilineal descent from the related men.

There are 15 such **localized lineages** with a maximum of 16 households in one and a minimum of 1 household in several others (in chapter IV, we have presented them as descent groups).

Due to the wide dispersal of the erstwhile clans throughout Assam today this **localized lineage** remains as the strength of the group. The families belonging to one such **localized lineage** usually perform formal ritual functions together, especially in observance of mourning. Even those families of such **localized lineage** who happen to reside outside the village for certain reasons like occupation or 'preferential' settlement in other towns or cities, are equally affected by such ritual pollution. Such a lineage may be regarded as an extension of the family and hence it is exogamous. It may also be termed as 'effective-lineage' (Mayer 1960), or *bamsha-parial* in Lakhimpukhuri. The spatial compactness of this group is maintained by inheritance of family property.

The role played by the **localized lineage** brings about a functional integration within the group and

also helps to define the boundaries of the group. Interestingly enough, in such a group even certain rituals reinforce the sense of WE feeling within the group and that definitely stabilizes the identity of the group within a changed environment. This suggests that among any groups, no matter how much a group undergoes changes, it always tries at a certain level to set a limit to such changes and thereby maintains a functional integrity within itself. The figure below is an attempt to explain the structural consistency of the Ahom society :

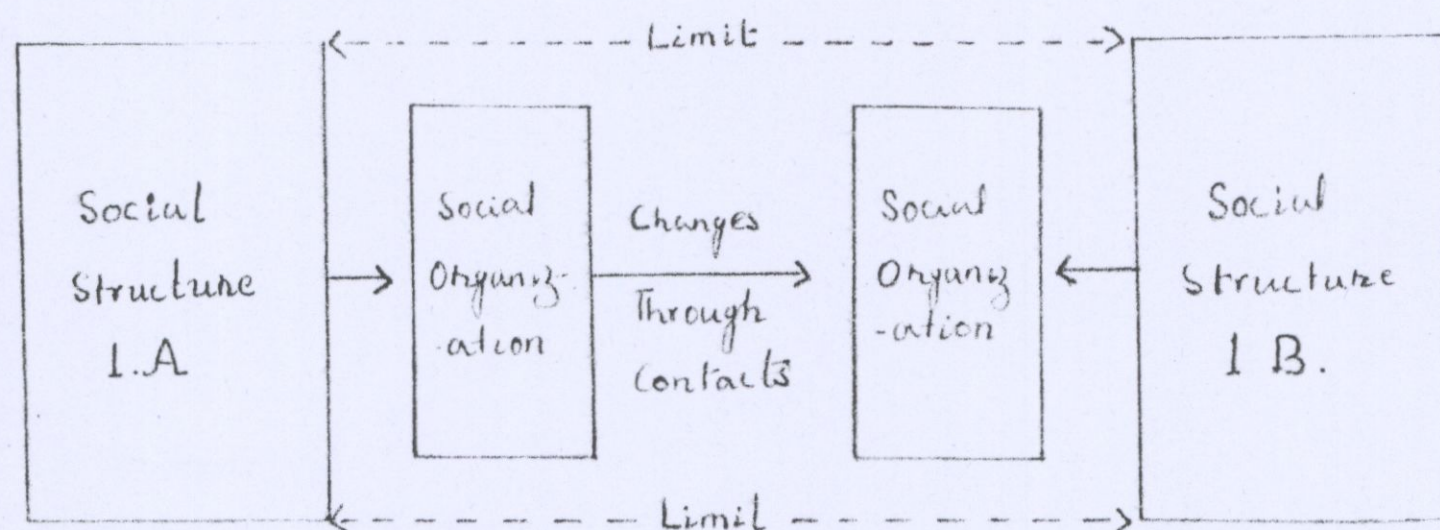


Fig. VII : The Ahom social structure.

If we accept social structure as an abstract or a model representing what one ought to be and social organization as what one really is (Firth 1954:5), we find that in a society individuals are organized in the light of its social structure. Both social structure and social organization are complementary to each other. Praxis do not necessarily tally the ideal and within the social organization activities are thus regulated according to the need of the

society. Any departure from the ideal does not effect the structure as long as it is within the limit. Only those departures that exceed the limit set by the structure and are permanent, can bring about a structural change (Firth 1954:4).

Carrying the above argument we can say that in the figure VII. as long as the social organization does not exceed the limit, the social structure IB is a mirror image of IA; and the identity of the group persists. Similarly in case of the Ahoms, 1). 'assimilation' of the autochthones enlarged the Ahom social organization (through regulated marriage, selective adaptation of cultural traits, etc.). It was necessary for a definite purpose relating to production relation system and administration (administration of the people with varied culture) and also it consolidated the strength of the Ahom social structure in terms of social, economic and political power.

2). Owing to the spatial dispersal of the clans, formation of the 'localized lineage' replaced the role of clans to a large extent. Sapinda rule gave a similar recognition to the 'localized lineage' as enjoyed by the earstwhile clans.

3). All these changes occurred in conformation, not in deviance to the Ahom traditional social

structure which actually gave a stability to the structure.

Beyond his village, a villager has another social network known as *mitu* (feminal kins. Mandelbaum 1970:148). *Mitu* are the relations of a man through his mother, his married sisters, his married brothers, his wife, his married daughters and married sons. This group provides an emotional support to a man, standing in a number of relations to him, as and when necessary; and the extent of closeness depends on how much frequent contact that one can maintain with one another.

Among the *mitu*, mother's brother is a special supportive kinsman. At times he and his household members become the only source of help when every other kinsman withdraws. Perhaps due to his sentiments attached to his mother's brother, he can freely express his feelings to the maternal uncle. It is also the mother's brother who, along with other lineal relatives, has the right to offer a special *xarai*-full of gifts (sweets and some money) known as *mamai-gharia-xarai* (*Xarai* from mother's brother's family) to the group of women from the village who sing at the marriage of his sister's children. This is a right not mandatory on other *mitir*.

Today, due to one's marriage to persons at distant places, *mitir* are not often sighted in the village, except in certain occasion of life-cycle ceremonies if called for. It is also owing to the fact that every time new *mitir* are established and the old ones become less effective due to lack of 'reference-person' (person through whom a *mitir* is established).

Nevertheless, *mitir* enjoy a special treatment of love and affection which one may not find amongst the lineal relatives, who unlike the *mitir*, have a claim on economic asset of the group, mainly land. They also form an important linkage for expanding one's *mitir* with new families. In other words, *mitir* give an external support to the group and also help in the internal growth of the group.

Within the village again, it represents a dual social network. In our earlier chapter (Chapter-III) we have seen how neo-vaisnavism has brought about a division in the Ahom society. Impact of that historical process is clearly visible in this village. Administratively, the village is a single unit under one *gaon-burha* (Village headman) appointed by the government. But, on the other hand, within the village, the villagers are divided into two religious divisions - *Brahma-samhati* and *Kala-samhati* (see

chapter III) and has two separate *nam-ghar* respectively. Forty one households out of the total seventyfive are adherent to *Kala-samhati* and the remaining thirtyfour households are the believers in *Brahma-samhati*.

Initially these divisions have been very distinct and the members maintained strict commensality and connubium (see chapter IV), although a number of inter-*khel* marriages have taken place in the recent past. Out of a total twelve such marriages, seven females have come to the *Brahma-samhati* sect and five females have gone to the *Kala-samhati* sect. All these marriages have taken place by elopement. They are not 'socially desirable' according to the villagers.

Our discussion in the previous section showed how freely the Ahoms use to chose their consort maintaining the rule of *jatua-Ahom* for their daughters only, and gradually becoming selectively endogamous within their own *samhati*. Today, they have broken this rule by 'undesirably' marrying Ahoms from different religious sects. Although, the society does not encourage such marriages, it does not have any rigid social sanction against such marriages today. Rather it has developed a smooth mechanism of tolerating such incidence by giving social approval to such union. The

process of 'initiation' as given by the *satra* to initiate any such person into the group can be seen as a force to stabilize the group. Over and again, through our discussion we observe that any event that tries to destabilize the group gets subdued by some mechanism or the other in order to maintain the structural integrity of the group. One may not get an effective *afinal* *kins* or *mitir* from such union. Nevertheless, one adds a new member to one's group. Moreover, it is from within the accultured culture that one tries to find such adaptive mechanism to maintain the group solidarity.

Commensality, as seen today, is restricted to those who are old and initiated. Younger generation Ahoms seem to care the least about it. In fact, in a certain festive occasion, young members from *khel-A* openly participated and ate pork or drink rice beer in *khel-B* which were once considered *akhadya* (see chapter IV) in *khel-A*. Some even cooked pork at their own place outside the *majia* (see chapter IV).

Today rice beer may be fermented in *khel-B* and secretly be brought and consumed in *khel-A*. One may also freely enjoy his bottle of distilled liquor which is sold in the village fair-price shop in *khel-A*. India manufactured foreign liquor, otherwise, is consumed without any prejudices.

They ~~say~~ "it is good but costly" and is reserved for special occasions like festivals, a visit of a *mitir* etc. The younger generation tries to rationalize such habits by saying that "our ancestors used to eat and drink anything under the sky and why should we not?". At times they seem to despise their being *Vaishnavite* and say "religion is for the old and the initiated; we will think about it when time comes".

Such an attitude of the younger generation visibly gives us two trends of change within the group in Lakhimpukhuri, although it is too early to comment on them. But it can not be overlooked either. Firstly, the active membership to the *nam-ghars* and thereby to the *satras* is gradually decreasing. Secondly, the dividing line between the two religious sects within the village is getting thinner and thinner and alcoholism in *khel-A* is becoming a threat to the family stability. There is also another trend in the village which is evident from their conscious attempt to know and perform certain traditional Tai-Ahom rituals. What prompts them to do so is a subject of further study.

On examining the traditional Tai-Ahom and present day Hinduized beliefs and practices, we find similarity in a number of such beliefs. Differences may occur in the way of performing the associated rituals, i.e. the

forms. Presence of such similarity may suggest a much early exposure of the group to Hinduism. This aspect of "exposure" to Hinduism can not be ruled out totally because

South-East-Asia Hinduism was predominant in those days. This was partly due to the efforts of Hindu colonists and partly due to commercial intercourse between India and the South-East-Asian countries (The Imperial Gazetteer Of India Vol. IX. 1908:107. Cited in Sen 1982:53); and "...Indian alphabet Dev Nagri was used in Tai-language up to the thirteenth century A.D. in Thailand and its neighbourhood (Mazumdar 1968:261. cited in Sen 1982:53).

If this is so, then Hinduism and later impact of Buddhism in South-East-Asia had undoubtedly set on the process of acculturation of the Ahoms even before they migrated to Assam. Later influence of Buddhism in South-East-Asia is very much evident from their Tai-script and other humanitarian activities which they undertook like construction of roads, digging of large ponds and building of temples on the banks of these ponds (Gogoi 1985:58).

Acculturation is a historically established phenomenon. It is also well established that one of the ways that cultures have grown is through borrowing. But the most interesting and at the same time challenging aspect is ~~the~~ selective borrowing and converting the borrowed items in ~~such~~ a manner that they fit into the culture of the borrow. ~~It~~ may continuously go through a process of fine tuning. ~~on this~~ when we superimpose the economic and political ~~compulsions a~~

group has to confront, the acculturation process becomes highly complex.

The contemporary beliefs and practices in Lakhimpukhuri appear to be dominated by the Hinduism. This is not surprising because the people claim themselves to be the Hindu. But they are The Hindu with a difference. They have a non-Hindu history which is pretty well known through a variety of popular media. They have a history of which people are proud of. It is not something which they would obliterate from their memory. Thus it could be hypothesised that a group like the Tai-Ahoms would be very selective in adaptation. Our data support this hypothesis. It is observed from our data on Lakhimpukhuri that those beliefs which have similar connotation in other culture get readily accepted. So is the case with the practices which the receiving culture finds similar utility value in it. Even myths which are similar get superimposed on the myths of other culture. For instance, the origin myth of the Ahoms that they are the descendants of Lengdon, the lord of heaven, has led to the creation of a new myth that facilitated the acceptance of Indra as synonymous to Lengdon and thereby accepting the kshatriya status with a lineage of *Indra vamsiya* (Gogoi 1968) and the title - *svarga-narayana* and *svargadeva*. So is in the case of *kecaikhati* and *ranachandi* among the Dimasas (Bhattacharjee

1987) and thereby gaining admittance to Hinduism. Situation of the Dimasas changed after they were forced out of their Kingdom and only a section of them remained Hindu much after they were initiated through *saran-bhajan* process of the *satra*, and today they are known as *Sonowal Kachari* in upper Assam. The Meiteis, however present a very different situation in this context in the sense that the king Garibnawaz had forced the Meities to take an oath that they would not negate the practices of Hinduism in the year of 1729 (Azunkumar 1993:143-44).

Similarly, a number of other tribal groups in Assam adapted Hindu *acaras* (ways of life) "...through giving up former habits and customs, such as eating pork and other forbidden food and drinking strong liquor; undergoing *prayachit* (atonement); and receiving *saran bhajan* from a *Gosain*, ... could gain admittance into the Hindu society with the status of *Saru Koch* (low Koch). For the first three generations they were looked down upon a little by their Hindu comrades and they were not allowed to take any leading part of their society. From the third generation they were accepted quite good as any Hindu of the *Bor Koch* (High Koch) caste (Bhagabati 1992:490).

Coming back to the beliefs practice, the Ahoms readily accepted those Hindu *Samaskaras* which are similar to their own. They accepted some to emulate or to achieve certain goals - upward mobility on caste hierarchy. But in the course of time, some were discarded when their purpose was fulfilled and their utility value had diminished.

The Vaisnavas in Assam perform *Smārta* rites in accordance with the prescription of Dharmasāstras. The Vaisnavas belonging to backward classes and tribes, however, do not uniformly perform these *sāṃskāras* (Sarma 1966:119). The Hindu scripture *Jatukaranya* as quoted in *Sam.Pr* (P.135) enumerates sixteen *sāṃskāras* as *garbhadhana*, *pumsavana*, *caula*, *maunji* (*upanayana*), *vratas* (four), *godana*, *samavartana*, *vivaha*, and *antyeṣṭi* (cited in Kane 1974:194). *Gaut* (VIII.14-24) speaks of forty *sāṃskāras* (Kane 1974:193).

It will be pointless to discuss the *sāṃskāras* from the Dharmasāstras in detail as there is no single authority on it. There is a great divergence of view among the writers as to the number of *sāṃskāras* themselves (Kane 1974:193). Therefore, we shall try to present those similar beliefs and practices as observed in this village and also certain others which have been either modified and incorporated or adapted according to the local niche.

To begin with, we present our data related to the life cycle of a man as observed in Lakhimpukhuri. Birth, as seen in chapter IV, is not simply a biological phenomenon of conception, pregnancy and delivery. These are enveloped in sociological process that entails a series of socio-religious beliefs and practices.

The prescribed traditional Hindu *sāmaskāras* like *garbhadhana* and *pumsavana* are visibly absent among the group, as they are meant specifically for the *dvija* or the twice-born caste Hindus. *Sāmaskāras* after conception like *garbharaksana/anulobhana* can be equated with *pītha-khawa* which is prevalent in the village with certain modifications. It is performed on the first month of pregnancy unlike on the 4th month of pregnancy as prescribed in *Smṛtyarthasāra*, with rituals modified according to local resources. This is a ritual which may have been adapted to identify the group at par with the neighbouring Hindu population. This particular ritual, in an institutionalized form is absent in the traditional Tai-Ahom culture. Of course, certain taboos that they follow may be equated with this ritual.

Panchamrit-khawa, is another ritual performed in the village. It is perhaps an extension of *garbharaksana* or may be equated to *sasyantikarma* which, among the traditional Hindus, is performed on the 10th month of pregnancy. In this village, it is performed in the wife's natal home on the 5th or 7th month to gain strength and vitality for the growing foetus. *Sasyantikarma*, otherwise, is a rite for a woman who is about to deliver a child (Kane 1974:227).

Jatakarma, the Hindu ritual performed in the case of birth of a son, is formally absent among the Ahoms in this village. But there is a practice of distributing fish, especially large scaled fish when a couple is blessed with a son. Even this ritual seems to be an adaptation from the local niche, and can be seen only among those who can afford it. In the village, the practice under question has become completely redundant today.

Homa/sūtikagni (it is prepared by placing the broken piece of a jar on the fire-place and heating it with the dried dung of a bull) is established near the door of the lying-in chamber of the lady who has delivered a child. White mustard seeds and rice chaff are to be offered in the fire for ten days whenever any body enters there.

Similar practice of establishing a fire near the bed of the mother and child, after delivery, is seen in the village. This practice is known in Tai as *uufai* and is devoid of any rituals but it is meant for 'drying-up' of the abdomen of the woman who has delivered a child. There is no stipulated number of days for the fire to be kept on. Associated with this practice is of course a ritual partaking of special food called *jaal-diya* which is performed on the 3rd day after child birth.

Namakarana or naming a child is a practice which is invariably present among all the Hindu communities. Traditionally, among the Ahoms, a child was given a name by a priest (see chapter IV). After they have embraced Hinduism, names of Hindu gods with certain suffix, names of legendary figures, names of flowers etc. are given to a child on the first day. These names are usually prescribed by a Brahmin priest after certain astrological calculations. At times, out of fear lest the child does not die or fall sick, funny names may also be given in an attempt to ward off the evil eye (see chapter IV). But no strict rules of avoidance or rejection of certain names as prescribed in Dharmasastra are followed.

Niskramana is a ritual of taking the child out of the house or in the open for the first time. A number of rituals are associated with it. A strong resemblance of this traditional Hindu ritual can be drawn with similar objective of introducing the child to the world, from the traditional Tai ritual called *aw-ook-can* or *baaj ulua* (in Assamese) as found in the village Lakhimpukhuri. It has also been adapted by other Assamese groups at large.

Annaprasana, or *Hudi* as it is known in the village, is undoubtedly an Assamese version of *annaprasana* which the Ahoms have adapted. It is performed when the child

is of 6 months old. It is absent among other Assamese Tai. The indispensable role of the mother's brother, *mama*, is a new element added to the traditional Hindu ritual prescribed in Dharmasastra, and is prominent in Orissa, Bengal and Assam. Introduction of *mama* into the ritual may perhaps be seen as a symbolic acknowledgement of material support that he is expected to provide to his sister's family, and is well evident from the earlier ritual *jaal-diya* performed on the 3rd day of birth, where the main provisions for the special dish are to be provided by him.

This ritual is seen today only among those who can afford it. Most of the villagers have either do not observe the ritual or do not even remember having performed this ritual at all.

Cudakarma or the first hair shaving ritual is prominent among the western Tai groups and is believed to be due to 'Indianization' of the groups by the 'Indianized' peoples with whom the Tai who trekked westwards came into contact and that it does not belong to the ancient Tai culture of the first millennium A.D. (Terwiel 1980:39). Therefore, it can be seen as a continuation of that 'Indianized' practice (ibid) which has found a similar meaning among the Hinduized Ahoms. The ritual again has become redundant and is seen completely out of practice in this village.

Nua-tuloni-biya is a ritual which is typical of and unique to the Hinduized Tai Ahoms and many other Assamese groups. The very nature and the objective of of this ritual seem to be contradictory to the prescription of *vivaha* in the *Dharmasastra*. According to the prescription of *Dharmasastra*, unmarried daughters at their natal home, after attaining menarchy, incur sin to their parents and brothers (Kane 1974:444); while in *nua-tuloni-biya*, it is an open exhibition of their daughters at the age at menarche. Perhaps the ritual of mock marriage with a banana tree is a symbolic atonement achieved by the parents by marrying off the daughters, when the actual marriages take place much after, when suitable grooms are found. This is an example of innovation of culture trait to fit into the central theme of the religion that they have adapted.

The ritual today is not universally observed in every household as discussed in chapter IV, yet it seems to be a 'die-hard' practice because of the concept of purity and pollution attached to it. Therefore, if not for oneself, it is more important to perform this ritual for the sake of saving the family from the clutch of disgrace and humiliations if one fails to observe the minimum expected ritual.

of late, this ritual is taking a different turn. Among those who can afford, the last rite of purification, i.e., on the 11th day (the duration may also be cut short to 9 days), is performed with full splendour and it resembles an actual marriage. Today, men folks openly participate in the ritual by drinking and playing cards for the rest of the night. Men's participation otherwise was a sort of taboo in this ritual.

Vivaha/udvaha/panigrahana or *biya* as discussed in our chapter IV:B gives us an idea as to how the Ahoms maintained a strict clan exogamy in the historical past. Because of the wide dispersal of the clans with the expansion of the state, the marriageable clans became inaccessible. Then with the acceptance of Hinduism, clan exogamy transformed into 'lineage exogamy' on the basis of *sapinda*-rule (restriction of marriage within the prohibited degrees. Kane 1974:438). *Sapinda* means 'one who is connected with another through oblation of food'. Food here is the *pinda*, 'the ball of rice' that is offered in *śrāddhas* to ancestors (Kane 1974:472). The rule prohibits one's marriage with a person standing up to 7 generations from the father's side and 5 generations from the mother's side. The practice of maintaining *vamsavali* among the Ahoms perhaps facilitated the acceptance of this rule under the changed socio-religious

environment. Even today, *Sapinda*-rule is followed while selecting a mate. Also marriage outside the group is not uncommon.

As far as the ceremonial aspect of marriage is concerned, the Vaisnavas in Assam (including the Ahoms) follow the practice of *Sampradana* (formal release of the daughter by one of the parents) after *katha-bujoni* (a short lesson on the rights and duties on marriage based on *Dharmasastra*, imparted by the eldest member among the invited *Bhakats*). *Agnisthapana* and *homa* are completely absent in this ritual, while it is present amongst other Assamese groups.

Chaklang is the traditional Tai-Ahom marriage ritual in which *katha-bujoni* (see chapter IV) is also imparted in Tai language which is later translated into Assamese. Interestingly, the Assamese version of it resembles the *katha-bujoni* of the Vaisnavas based on *Dharmasastras*. It is perhaps for this similarity and for the cost involved in *chaklang* ritual that the Hinduized Ahoms have accepted the *katha-bujoni* way of marriage at large. The *chaklang* ritual which is practised today even carries a number of the Hindu traits, viz., the application of vermilion on the forehead of the bride and the act of the exchange of garland. In the

present village where only one such *chaklang* marriage has been recorded after 30 years, where even the Ahom villagers from the nearby villages, invited or uninvited came rushing to witness *chaklang*. The incident is undoubtedly a state of renewed interest of the people to know more about the ritual.

Antyesti, the last rite related to a human life, is performed in three different phases, viz., *tiloni*, *daha* and *mahekiā-hakam* (see chapter IV:B). These rituals in the village represent a mixture of Vaisnavite, Hindu-sapinda and Tai rituals. All these rituals concern with the dead and the ancestors. The belief in ancestors among the Ahoms has been the central theme of their ancient religion (as evident from community rituals like *me-dam me-phi* and *umfra*). This strong belief on the souls of the dead perhaps facilitated the acceptance of those Hindu rituals which are related to death.

Besides these special life-cycle rituals, there is another important ritual *snāna*, which is prescribed in the *Dharmaśāstra* (Kane 1974:664-67). These ritual-bathings or *snana* have been selectively accepted by the Ahoms and they do have a similar concept of *aptāng* (ceremonial bath) within a larger purview of *rik-khvan-mung-khvan* with the primary objective of gaining strength and vitality (see

chapter iv). This ritual can be seen in the light of *Kāmya-snāna* (bath for some desired object) as prescribed in *Dharmasastra* (Kane 1974:666).

An Over-view :

Some 700 years back, in the year 1228, a small group of adventurous people, with their chief Sukapha entered Assam with little knowledge of the fact that they would be arrested forever by the banks of the mighty Brahmaputra. In course of time, they set the foundation of a nation - Assam and a new nationality called Assamese emerged.

While doing so, the group ungrudgingly accepted the ethos and values of the soil, leaving "some of their own" and equally contributing "some of theirs" to the local population. Now, 700 years after, the group stands proudly as the genitor of the culture the Assamese.

Even when they have undergone a tremendous change in every sphere of life, they seem to have set a limit to the forces of change and zealously guard their identity of being an Ahom within the greater identity, i.e., the Assamese.

Certain new elements are incorporated into the group by a selection-elimination process with a definite

purpose of maintaining their identity. The historical forces that operated on the Ahoms of the Lakhimpukhuri village were similar to all the Ahoms of Assam. Therefore from our discourse on the acculturation of the Ahoms, we may forward a few generalizations as to show how the process of selection-elimination operated under a number of contact situations that the Ahoms undergoing acculturation had to face. They are as follows :

1. Certain forms are borrowed and incorporated to achieve a higher status in wider social framework.
2. Those values which were similar to their's got incorporated without much change in the original forms.
3. New forms with similar values showed considerable ability of persistence.
4. Certain values got discarded in course of time as they lost utility value in their society.
5. The incoming culture possessed certain vested interests which actually encourage the retention of traditional beliefs of the receiving culture.

On the basis of the above generalizations we may draw this inference that the Ahoms in course of their long history have synthesised a new culture based on the process of acceptance, rejection, and persistence. The new form that has been synthesised shows the persistence of old values to a remarkable degree. This inference validitates our hypothesis.