

Hindu - Muslim relations in Mediaeval Assam

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Political contact of Assam with the Bengal Sultans from the very beginning of thirteenth to sixteenth centuries and the Mughals in the seventeenth century no doubt opened a new phase in the socio-cultural and political history of mediaeval India. The very fact that Assam, a small kingdom in the extreme north east frontier of India could retain to the last its independent status against the mighty Mughals, who had made themselves the master of almost the whole of India and could check their aggressive imperialism towards the east has a great significance in the political history of Assam and at the same time throws some light on the development of relations between these two communities. Ahoms and Mughals in Assam. As such, an attempt has been made to bring out some of the factors that leads to the development of Hindu-Muslim relations in mediaeval Assam.

During the course of the military operation of the Ahoms against the Muslim rulers (i.e. Bengal Sultan and the Mughals) in India, the Ahom carried away a large number of Muslim soldiers as captives, and these soldiers were ultimately settled in this kingdom (Assam) by inter-marrying the local Women, adopting their manners and customs, speaking their languages¹ and became Assamese in the true sense of the term. This is rightly observed by Shihabuddin Talish, who accompanied Mir Jumla in his Assam expedition in 1663 A.D. in the following words.

"It is said that certain inhabitants of the country who bear the name of Muhamadans are descended from the captive soldiers of that army".² It is also mentioned that some of these captive soldiers were distributed as retainers among the kings and nobles, whereas some of them were settled at different places.³ But during the time of Ahom king Pratap Singh (1603-1614) Momai Tamuli Barbarua while re-organising the villages, distributed the people of different ethnic origin, including the Muslims in the same villages. This had removed the danger of an eventual rebellion from the local Muslim population

and greatly enhanced the assimilation of the Muslims with the indigenous population of Assam. This process of assimilation was also promoted by the Vaisnava reformers like Sankardeva, Madhavdeva and Aniruddhdeva who had converted the Muslims named Chand Khan⁴ by Sankaradeva, Joyhari by Madhadeva⁵ and Dhela Bora⁶ by Aniruddhdeva. They were so respected within the Vaisnava religious order that "they were counted among the great devotees, identified with the head of an Assam Vaisnava rosary".⁷

But the contribution of the Muslims in the Ahom political system, (administration) the Buranjis opine⁸ that the use of guns was first introduced in Assam by Turbak who led an invasion against this kingdom in 1532 A.D. During the time of Suhungmung Dihingia Raja (1497-1539 A.D.) and henceforth the Ahom kings appointed Muslim experts to make guns, and their (Muslim) artisan and craftsmen were also incorporated in to the Khanikar Khel or the "guild of artisan" under an officer called Khanikar Barua.⁹ It should also be mentioned that the captives of the Mughal general Sayyid Abu Bakr in (1615-1616 A.D) were appointed by Ahom king Pratap Simha to train hawks and were placed under an officer called Senchowra Barua. The Ahom kings also appointed the Muslims in both civil and military offices, ranging from Bora to Hazarika. These Muslims like the Ahom conquerors become one with the indigenous population so much so that, during the protracted conflict of Assam with the Mughals in the seventeenth century not a single of them deserted the cause of the country. To put in the words of Shihabuuddin Talish¹⁰ "As for the Musslmans who had been taken prisoner in former times and has choosen to marry, there, their decendents are exactly in the manner of Assamese and have nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined for more towards mingling with the Assamese, than towards association with the Muslims". Due to this nationalistic urge which emerged into their hearts, ultimately played an active part against that of the mighty Mughals. Most important of them were Sultan Garia, Suhum Garia, Laidhan Kha and Ismail Siddiqi better known as Bagh Hazarika¹¹ who was made the commander of the regimen of Garhgaon in the famous battle of Saraighat that took place in 1667 - 1671 A.D during the time of Chakradhavj Simha and Udayaditya Simha respectively.

As the Ahoms were very liberal in their social outlook, that helped in the rapid and harmonious assimilation between the Muslims and the indigenous people. Though these two communities were different in their culture, customs, social structure, religious belief and practices, but when they close together their ideological conflict transform into a mutual understanding and social communication and co-operation. These new converts increased the strength of the Muslim population of the state. The Muslims in Assam were and are still known as "Garias" a term which indicated their origin from Gaur the capital of the Sultans of Bengal.¹² Gunabhiram Barua opines that they were so called because they were the descendents of Muhammad of Ghor who was popularly called Ghuni Muhamad in Assam.¹³

Apart from this, the Ahom kings fully utilised the services of the Muslim population. A large number of them were appointed in several departments of the state, for example minting of coins, painting, carpentry, embroidery work, persi panhia (persian readers) Akharkatia (engraver) Gunakatiya (gold and silver thread maker) Khanikar (dyers and painters) Dorjee (tailor) and Jola (weaver & spinner), Mustri, Rajmistri etc.¹⁴ whom definitely contributed in strengthening the relations between them.

During the period of survey, there was frequent interchange of embassies between the Ahom and the Mughal courts. The Ahom king Rudra Simha created two different sets of officers called the Khaunds and the Bairagis, who were entrusted with the duty of visiting important centres of India and import beneficent foreign customs in to their own country. As a result of this interchange, Mughal culture exercised considerable influence on Assamese society. These new elements were completely assimilated, so that it led to the growth of a refined nationalistic Assamese culture. Impact of Mughal art, architecture, sculpture and painting is clearly visible in those of the Ahom age. Dilbars painting on the *Hasti Vidyarnava* was on Mughal setting. Similar painting, in the manuscripts of Siva Simha's reign like the *Dharma-purana* manuscript in the British museum bear indelible marks of the influence of the Mughal school of painting.¹⁵ Musical instruments like Nagera, Pakhuaj etc. were brought from the Mughals. Gunabhiram Barua observes that king Rudra Singha sent an Assamese musician to Delhi to learn the playing of Pakhuaj and have mastery over Mughal music.¹⁶ Chandratap¹⁷ invariably used in the Namghars

(prayer halls), Sattras, temples, and mosques were also in imitation of the Mughals. The use of pagjar (turban) and jama (shirts), charga-chapkan¹⁸ and shoes by the Ahom kings and noble come from the Mughals.

As a result of their social outlook, two Assamese princesses namely Ramani Gabharu the daughter of Ahom king Jaydhavj Simha and a daughter of Tipam Raja were offered to the Mughals but prince Azam third son of emperor Aurangzeb¹⁹ by the terms of the treaty of 1663 who married Ramani who ultimately assumed the name of Rahmat Banu and adjusted herself in the Mughal palace. Moreover, the Ahoms did not abstain from taking food cooked by Muslims and non-muslims, this encouraged the muslim population to be one with the non-Muslims and to fight for their land with zeal — and patroism.

The cordial relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims in Assam was possible mainly due to two reasons. Firstly the religious toleration of the Ahom kings and secondly the wide prevalence of Vaisnavism in the country. The Ahom kings not only granted peopal lands for the maintainence of mosques to the peers and the saints but themselves honoured the Islamic form of prayer. Three or four Muslim priests always remained in attendance at the kings palace. The moment the king came forth to take his seat "They called down the blessings of God on him with elevated hands". Whenever, the king sent them to offer oblation in Hajo maqam, he sent them along with considerable presents. It has been found that when the Ahom king Pramatta Simha was seriously ill he deputed a Muslim priest to Mecca to pray for his recovery and prosperity of the state. No doubt that the Muslim magams or dargahas are scattered in the Brahmaputra valley and their maintainance was encouraged by the state which is evident from the assignment of the perquisites of a number of magams in Kamrup district to Anwar Haji Fakir,²⁰ and the customs of despatching annual presents from the court to the poa-Mecca Dargah at Hajo. On the contrary, the prevalence of Vaisnavism too helped in the integration of Muslim population with the Assamese Hindus. The monotheism and principles of equality and universal brotherhood taught by Vaisnavism were at par with the teaching of Islam. The catholicity of Vaisnava monks coupled with that of the Ahom rulers created an ideal atmosphere of peace and amity under which the Muslims accepted this country as their motherland.

The most important exponent who was greatly responsible in the development of Hindu-Muslim unity in Assam was Ajan Fakir, whose real name was Syed Shah Milan who had a mosque constructed in his honour at Huaguri, six kilometers from Sibsagar town, by the Ahom king. He composed the famous Assamese Zikirs,²¹ which in thought and style were exactly similar to the prayer songs composed by Sri Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva, which was the fine blending of vacable of Perso-Arabic words in Assamese language. As is mentioned in this Zikir.²²

Mor manat aan bhav nai oh Allah

mor manat aan bhav nai

Hindu ki Mussalman ek Allar farman

mor manat aan bhav nai

Hinduk puriba, Musalmanak putiba

eke khani jaminar tatal.....

(I do not make any distinction between a Muslim and a Hindu, O Allah when dead, a Hindu will be burned a Muslim will be cremated under the same earth).

So by this, Azan Fakir exerted a profound influence on the minds of the Assamese people. It is even said that he converted a number of Nagas to Islam.

The unity between the Hindus and the Muslims in Assam have given a unique feature in her civilization and culture. Assamese nationalism is a product of assimilation of both Hindu and Muslim elements. Assamese people have great pride when they observe the "Assamese king stopped the Muslim flood from penetrating into Burma and beyond on a wave of aggressive warfare and conquest, colonisation, proselytisation and then conquest of Arab merchants and their religious teachers in Indonesia led to the final Islamisation of Indonesia. The Arabs and then later on Indian Muslim merchants from western India found a direct lien of access by sea to Malaya and Indonesia, but a land route for aggressive advance was denied to Indian Muslims by the Ahoms of Assam. Otherwise, the history of Burma and Siam and Indo-China might have been different.²³ In this context one should not forget then the wonderful success of the Ahom kings was possible not merely to their Hindu Assamese population in both the hills and plains but also to their Muslim subjects.

Notes and References

1. S.K. Bhuyan, *Swargadeo Rajeswar Simha*, henceforth *SRB*, (Gauhati, 1975), p. 171.
2. E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, (revised edition Gauhati, 1967). p. 153.
3. S.K. Bhuyan, (ed) *Kachari Buranji*, (Gauhati, 1936), p. XIX; *Abong Sattar*
4. Maheswar Neog, *Asamar Dharmar Buranji, Andhar aru Puhar* (Jorhat, 1988), p. 41.
5. *Ibid.*
6. M. Neog, ed. *Aniruddhadeva Charit aru Mayamara Sattrar* Vamsavali, (Gauhati, 1960), p. 20.
7. Ramanada Dvija, *Guru Charit*, VVI, pp. 293ff : M. Neog, *Sankardeva and his times*, (Gauhati, 1965), p. 369.
8. Padmanath Gohain Barua. *Asamar Buranji* (Gauhati, 1976) p. 43, Gunabhiram Barua, *Assam Buranji* (Guhati, 1972), (henceforth *ABG*) p. 76.
9. See my article, 'Impact of Mughal administration on Assam in the seventeenth century' *Proceeding of North East History Association*. (Shillong, 1983), p. 108.
10. Gait, *op. cit.* p. 153
11. *SRB*. p. 171 *Sattar, op. cit.*, p. 19. The famous Assamese poet Maffizuddin Hazarika the author of *Gyanmalini* is a descendent of Bagh Hazarika.
12. Gait, *op. cit.*, p. 96n.
13. *ABG*, p. 76.
14. *SRB*, pp. 166-168.
15. Jamiruddin Ahmed in his article 'Asamiya Sanskritit Musalmanar Prabhah" Published in *Sahitya aru Sanskriti*, a collection of seventeen articles, Baraeta 1969, p. 171; *ABG*. p. 93.
16. *Ibid.*
17. It is a kind of very big decorated umbrella.
18. S.K. Bhuyan (ed.) *Tungkhungia Buranji*. (Gauhati, 1990) pp. 325.

19. SRB, p. 170.
20. King Lakshmi Simha (1796-1780) became highly pleased by his conversation with the fakir and granted him revenue free lands in Kamrup together with the necessary number of servitors as well as the perquisites of the following *magam* or *dargah*, Shah madar Bar Maqam of Bausi pargana, Shah Fakirs Maqam in Barnagar paraganah, Panch peerar Maqam in Khetri paraganah and one fourth share of the Bar maqam at Hajo. The above grant was embodied in a royal *farman* inscribed on a copper plate, Anwar Fakir is a founder of a distinguished Assamese Muslim family.
21. See, Syed Abdul Malik *Asamiya Zikir aru Zari*, (Gauhati, 1962)
22. Syed Abdul Malik, *Ajan Fair*, (Calcutta, 1990). p. 14.
23. S.K. Chatterjee, *The place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India*, (Gauhati University, 1970), pp. 45ff.