

Cross-Currents of the Hinduisation Process in Mediaeval Assam

Ramesh Buragohain

Introduction

From the pre-historic times, Assam was the home of the non-Aryan tribes, animism being the dominant feature in their socio-religious life. They were known as the Kirata, the Garo, Bodo, Khasi and Kachari etc., having Mongoloid traits and features. Therefore, to the Aryans, the Northeast was a *mlechha desha*, a significant sociological term in the context of Aryan and non Aryan relations. The earliest Hindu impact in Assam or say in the North east seems to have been the prevalent of the Saivic cult.¹ Siva was usually considered as a non Aryan god.² Simplicity of the tribal life was indicative of Saivism which had its influence even before the advent of the Ahoms. The god 'Siva' might have been a later inclusion in the Hindu pantheon and it is in this context, some scholars find a Mongolian Aryan cultural synthesis³ in Assam and therefore, it is not unlikely that the Ahom god 'Langkuri' was being identified with Siva. However, Saivism had no preselytizing elements and it marks a passivity in the civilising process even though some of the Ahom rulers consecrated temples and establishments in the name of 'Siva' which admits the fact that Saivism occupied a special place in Assam.⁴

The Hinduisation process

The process of Hinduisation in the Northeast began under the Kamarupa rulers when large number of Brahmins were patronised and when sanskritization led to the development of the Assamese language from the tribal bases particularly in the plains areas. The hilly areas being prone to increased productivity in largescale agriculture and being geographically isolated remained mostly out of the Hindu impact. The disappearance of the Kamarupa kingdom and in the absence of a strong centralised polity, the process received a set back. However, in the Bhuyan chiefdoms and in the Chutiya kingdom the process continued to hang on and Aryanisation did

not lose grounds. Nevertheless, the process was rather slow in Upper Assam and therefore, when the Ahoms first settled there, an Ahomisation process emerged. But with the annexation and absorption of the Chutiya State and the petty Bhuyan principalities in due course and followed by the Koch kingdom later, the Ahomisation process had to give way to the Hinduisation process. Thus the process gained momentum after the political consolidation of the Ahom state, emerging in a highly centralised polity under the Brahmanical impact which I have attempted elsewhere.⁵

On the whole, the process of Hinduisation, with its philosophic and materialistic tenets, was a civilising one, detribalisation being its main current bringing about marked changes in socio religious life of the otherwise tribal people. Apparently, it also envisaged a *Kshatriyaisation* process as the case of the Ahoms, Koch and Kacharis would suggest.

The cross-currents

Another dimension of the Hinduisation process, in its cross-cultural aspects, is seen in the proselytization of the *Bhakti* cult that emerged through the development of the Assamese literature. The neo-Vaishnavite movement produced the transliterations of the *Bhagavat-Purana*, the *Mahabharata*, *Harivansa*, parts of the *Padma-Purana*, the *Vishnu-Purana* and others in the Assamese language. The major part of the *Bhagavat-purana* was translated by Sankaradeva himself which became the *Bible* of the Vaishnavas of Assam in later times. The chief merit of such literary works was that these were rendered into the simplest form of the Assamese language with a mass appeal. It was like the first translation of the *Bible* into the English language which then became the basis for the later development of the English language. It was no exception with the development and growth of the Assamese language too. As with the language, this was also a factor behind the growth of an independent new Assamese culture out of the synchronic assimilation of the divergent ethnic groups of people. Other similar works of Sankaradeva like the *Kirtana*, *Namghosa* etc. some of which were undoubtedly the literary master-pieces of the time, became symbolic in the emergence of the Assamese nation and nationality, a factor of great significance in the birth of Assamese nationalism. Besides, Sankaradeva, the father of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam, was a man of uncommon genius combining in himself all the great quali-

ties of a poet, musician, painter, dancer, singer composer, actor and above all, being a spiritual guide and a social reformer himself, he could make profound influence and deep impact particularly on the common masses.

But the Brahmanic cult of Hinduism was not only caste oriented but also class dominated. It was, in fact, prone to social inequalities and its unfounded liberal patronisation by the Ahom rulers added new dimensions in the socio-political spheres. The neo-vaishnavite movement was the product of the social circumstances of the time. In countering the Brahmanical over-jealousness, Sankaradeva visualised the trends of social changes which were emerging and taking forms and so he wrote in *Bhagavat XIII* that rich man alone is considered as a man of great caste, of good manners and of great qualities. The powerful man commits all sins and always has his victory by corruption. The twice-born people have forsaken their holy duties, but do hypocritically put a show of them ; they are avaricious and bereft of their castely duties,”⁶ No doubt, this gives sufficient indication of the growing social contradictions in terms of the social and economic inequalities. Maheswar Neog has rightly projected the role of Sankaradeva as a social revolutionary when he says :

*It is precisely to protest against and correct the evils of social and individual life, that Sankaradeva wrote. Yet do we not call him a social revolutionary, wreaking nihilism in a corrupted world. He did rather seek to purify society of its evil from within. He saw what ailed society- caste hatred, sacerdotalism, economic exploitation..... to uproot them would have meant a great upheaval.*⁷

To uproot them would have meant the end of the state. Because, ‘the state is an organisation of the possessing class for its protection against the non-possessing class’.⁸ Because, all revolutions until now have been revolutions for the protection of one kind of property against another kind of property’.⁹ Because, the process of Hinduisation essentially being a civilising one, the exploitation of one class by another was the basis of this civilisation’ and as such, the whole cross-currents of development moved in a continuous contradiction, as the subsequent history of Mediaeval Assam had proved.

In his social revolution, Sankaradeva adopted the most simple but an ingenuous means. It was the *Bhakti* cult. Sankaradeva’s

success was in his ability to make the social protest of his time a practicable proposition for restoring balance in the society by arresting the evils of casteism of the Hindu religion since *Bhakti* was no respecter of caste.¹⁰ That the caste system could not raise its ugly head in Assam as it did elsewhere in India at that time and even to day was largely due to Sankaradeva's humanistic precepts. Another, reason for the success of the neo-Vaishnavite movement was in its democratic elements. It drew a large number of followers because in the eyes of god all men were equal. The message of Sankaradeva was clear and it drew the divergent ethnic population including the ruling Ahoms magnetically to its fold even including some Brahmins.

Yet neo-Vaishnavism failed to meet the challenge of the conservative forces of the time, instead, it made a compromise by sanctioning the observance of the traditional rites and performance of the blood sacrifices by the ruling Ahom monarchs.¹¹ Otherwise also, the first support to the *Bhakti* movement came from some of the Kayastha Bhuyans who recently lost their political power in the hands of the Ahoms and who were also joined by some intellectual Brahmins and other professional traders and artisans. Thus the *Bhakti* cult of the neo-Vaishnavite movement was turned towards the favour of the ruling class interest and in due course, some Vaishnavite preceptors became influential members in the royal court.¹² It became a meaningful device for exploitation of the passive masses by the Hindu intellectuals in the garb of religious preceptors so much so that their greed for political power and pelf nakedly manifested when they dribbled in the court intrigues particularly during the period of weak rulers (1673-1681) and thereafter. Some of them openly involved themselves in king making.¹³ In short, the top Vaishnavite elites forgot the tenets of Sankaradeva and became the victims of materialism since, 'A title to the headship of a *Satra* was thus one to wealth and to the command over a large number of people,¹⁴ became their cherished goal. Therefore, Guha sounds convincing when he says :

By the end of the 17th century, the mainstream of neo-Vaishnavism was no more viewed as a lower caste challenge to the feudal social inequality by the authorities concerned. It began to receive state patronage and turn itself into an agency of collaboration. For, its cult of Bhakti (devotion) and sharana (surrender) could be and was used to ramify the feudal culture¹⁵.

Another significant aspect of such dimensions was the mush-

room growth of the *Satras*, both on royal patronage and popular support, which became the sanctuaries for the truant *pykes*. The Ahom government failed to handle the situation since the *Satras* were already becoming very powerful social institutions. Instead of finding out a solution or striking at a reconciliation, the government complicated the matter by bringing in the *Shakta* faith to an official status. The sort of 'divide and rule' policy, in the religious milieu putting *Shaktaism* against Vaishnavism leading to 'patronise and persecute' policy, now failed to deliver the goods.

Thus Vaishnavism and *Shaktaism*, entangled in the race of political power and influence, the spiritual nobility became conterminous with the feudalistic elements and the political culture of the Ahom state transformed radically. The Ahom state edifice built upon the exploited labours of the *pyke* militia which synchronised both agricultural surplus and defence warfares with internal order and harmony, had so long served the ideological purpose of the state. But once the defence warfares were over and the agricultural surplus was stabilized, the ideology became empty. The growing internal conflicts and contradictions could not produce any alternative way for a reconciliation. The kin-based feudal type structure of the Ahom system was fast decaying weakening the central authority then what it had been in the past 16th and 17th centuries. Similar was the case with the *pykes* whose ideological base of *Rajbhakti* now got transformed into *Gurubhakti*. All these took place under the impact of Hinduisation whose materialistic culture encompassed the civilising process in amassing more wealth, property and prestige, power and status leading to enormous contradictions and complexities which the Ahom state found it unable to dispel.

Secondly, the population structure of the Ahom state in the 17th century Assam also contributed to the rapid transformations. The multi-ethnicity character of the population was fastly narrowing down under the process of Hinduisation. Terror and thought control could no longer be the means of the state to exact obligation. The Ahom character of the state was slowly disappearing being replaced by an Assamese character; in other words, the process of detribalisation was complete. The term 'Ahom' now signified only a handful of ruling Ahoms. Because, at the common level of the totality, the blend between Ahom and Assamese along with some other detribalised groups became so cemented that some Assamese could just trace their Ahom descent. Thus the Hinduisation process exploded the myth of the old conception of national

character based on biological differences.¹⁶ Thus, to say the least, the Hinduisation process became an Assamiyaisation process. The state got bewildered and perplexed at its own creation and at the vastness of the complexities arising out of such enormous changes in trend and texture.

Notes & References

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5. See my Paper 'On Brahmanical Influence in the Formation of the Ahom State', *Proceedings Volume*, North East India History Association. Eighth Session, Kohima, 1987, pp. 170-182
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9. *Ibia.*, p. 113.
10. Maheswar Neog, n. 6, p. 41.
11. Amalendu Guha, Neo-Vaishnavism to Insurgency....., Occasional Paper No. 67, CSSS, Calcutta, May, 1984, p. 9.
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13. In the contest to the throne made by Godapani, Bonomali Gosain, the *Satradhikar* of Dakshinpat *Satra*, openly supported the case of *Lora Raja* (the boy king Sulikpha) since he was his disciple. He tried to influence the noble Bandar Barphukan against Godapani's case. See Asom Buranji, S. K. Bhuyan, ed., D.H.A.S., Guwahati, 2nd edn, 1962, p. 37.
14. Maheswar Neog, N. 12, p. 13.
15. Amalendu Guha, n. 12, p. 31.
16. E.H. Carr, *What is History?* Macmillan, Reprint, 1969, p. 26.