

On Hindu Influence In the Ahom Court

Indu Bhusan Pal

The thirteenth century A.D. begins with the appearance of a remarkable foreign tribe in the political stage of Assam. Although the Ahoms had neither the military skill, inordinate imperialistic ambition and religious ardour of the Turko-Afgans, nor the political idealism or artistic attainments of the great Mughals, yet they succeeded in arresting the attention of the historians like both these great rulers of Medieval India. This had been largely due to the following reasons.

Firstly, in the medieval period, we are no longer confronted with the problem of the scarcity of the sources of materials for the construction of the Medieval History of Assam. The Ahom were endowed with historical faculty. This faculty resulted in the outcome of genuine works of historiography, viz. the Buranjis.

Secondly, the establishment of the Ahom rule in Assam synchronised with the beginning of the rule of the Turko-Afgans in the Gangetic Valley. While the Ahom conquest of Assam was purely political the Conquest of the Turko-Afgans was motivated by religio-political considerations. The ambition of the Turko-Afgans was fired by Pan-Islam-Arabic nationalism. Hence their political supremacy was followed by their frantic effort for complete Islamisation of the conquered land.

Thirdly, both the Ahoms and the Turko-Afgans came with their own religion, language and culture. Both of them accepted their respective kingdoms as their homelands. But the Turko-Afgans not only stuck to their own religio-cultural tradition of their ancestors but adopted a hostile attitude towards Indian religion and culture and made frantic efforts to Islamise the Indian subjects. Fortunately for Assam, the Ahom rulers were not influenced by the reactionary outlook of their northern Indian counterparts. The catholicity of Ahom character and pragmatic outlook led them to surrender their own religio-cultural tradition at the altar of Hinduism to pave the way for peaceful assimilation and integration with their native subjects.

It is against such a backdrop that our attempt to trace the

history of the spread of Hindu influence in the Ahom Court is largely based upon.

Growth of the Hindu Influence

The beginning of the intrusion of the Hindu influence may be traced from the accession of Sudangpha Bamuni Kowar (1398-1407) ¹ He brought from the house of his Brahman foster father some Hindu traditions to the Ahom Court. He was the first Ahom king to adopt the coronational rites by ascending the Singharighar with other elaborate Hindu rites and rituals. Pomp and grandeur, showering upon loaves and fishes to the ranks & files & by striking coins, although the Ahoms hardly knew about money economy. ² The worship of Lakshminarayan 'Salagramasila' started during his reign. His Brahman foster father was appointed adviser to the King. ³ The faint shadow of Hindu influence thus received a jerk for further penetration to follow.

The Hindu influence had its full manifestation during the reign of Suhungmung Dihingiaraja (1497-1539). His reign witnessed territorial expansion of the kingdom at the expense of the kingdoms of the Chutias & the Kacharis. The king assumed the Hindu title of Swarganarayan & came to be known popularly as Swargadeva which henceforth became the official title of the Ahom Kings. He introduced Saka era in the Kingdom. The Aryan priests seized the opportunity to graft the Hindu myths on Ahom legends and deified the Ahom king with Indra, the Lord of Heaven, attributing a sacred status to him. Shungmung's reign witnessed the rise of neo-Vaishnavism under the leadership of Shrimanta Sankardeva. Thus political unification and religio-cultural integration ran parallel.

During the reign of Sukhampha (1552-1603) Vaishnavism spread far & wide in the kingdom due to the untiring efforts of the disciples of Sankardeva & Madhavdeba. Countless Satras sprang up in different parts of the kingdom many common people & some high Ahom officials openly embraced Vaishnavism. He was the first Ahom king to introduce Durgapuja Festival in the kingdom. ⁵

The reign of Pratap Singha Susengpha (1603-1641) witnessed the unabated increase of the Hindu influence in the Ahom Court & the kingdom. ⁶ Aryan Brahmans were favoured with land grants. Octagon shaped coins were issued following a Sloka in the Yoginitantra. Some Brahmans were appointed in the State diplomatic

service. Henceforth Ahom Kings started adopting Hindu names in addition to their Ahom names.

The accession of Jayadvaj Singha is an epoch-making event in the history of the spread of Hindu influence in the Ahom Court. (1648-1663). He was the first Ahom King to embrace Hinduism. (Mahapurushia Vaishnavism) formally. Thus the period of informal Ahom patronage & the shy & stealthy advance of Hinduism came to an end the era of aggressive advance of Hinduism began. Meanwhile neo-vaishnavism coming out of the womb of Brahmanical Hinduism behaved like a rebel child and challenged the validity of Brahmanical rites & rituals. Jayadvaj Singha's ordination through Niranjan Babu, a Vaishnav Mahanta, speaks volume of the influence of the new sect. ⁷ Jayadvaj Singh and all his successors upto Sulikpha Loraraja were all followers of Mahapurushia Vaishnavism. Till now toleration was the general principle of the religious policy of the Ahom Kings.

The history of the spread of Hindu influence in the Ahom court took a sudden turn with the beginning of the rule of the Tungkhongia Dynasty. The period of religious toleration was over and the era of religious persecution began. The reign on Gadhadar Singh, ushered Sakta cult in the Ahom Court. (1681-1696). During his reign Vaishnavism became very popular in the kingdom. The popularity of Vaishnavism & their demonstration of the disciples against compulsory state service under the leadership of Mahantas persued a vigorous policy of Vaishnava persecution. Powerful Mahantas & disciples were killed & their properties confiscated ⁸. When climax was reached the king called for a halt and restitution in cases wherre innocent people were wrongly put to torture & humiliation. ⁹

Though a Sakta, Rudra Singh the Great was not a religious begot. (1696-1714). He reversed the policy of his father & restored religious toleration. By granting religious freedom to every religious sect he brought back normalcy in the kingdom. As he grew old his leanings towards Hinduism increased & he opined to take 'Sharan' or initiation. But the involvement of prostration before the Guru refrained him & he gave up the idea from his mind. ¹⁰ However, he continued to be a patron of the Sakta cult of Hinduism in the State. He declared Hinduism as the State religion & thus made the Ahom kingdom a Hindu State.

Hindu influence reached the zenith of power, prestige & popularity during the reign of Sib Singha (1714-1744). Sib Singh gave up the projected military adventure of his father & took resort to

religion. He became a disciple of Krishnaram Bhattacharjee and placed the management of Kamakhya, a temple under his disposal¹¹ Sib Singha was a peace-loving and weak minded king. He was completely under the influence of the Brahman Priests and astrologers. The ominous forecast of the impending end of his reign made him so panicky that in pursuance of the advice of sooth-sayers he handed over the administration of his kingdom to his queen Fuleswari and declared her as Bararaja.¹² This impulsive queen was also a blind follower of Saktatism. She tried to bring all subjects within Saktafold by force. But this only fanned the flame of sectarian enmity and sowed the seeds of disintegration of the kingdom.¹³

Following the foot-steps of the king and the queen many Ahom nobles came under the banner of Sakta cult.

The triumphant march of Hindu influence continued without any interruption during the reign of Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769) He was also a Sakta. He erected many temples and donated lands to the Brahmans. Though indolent he was a capable ruler. There was law & order in the kingdom. Trade & commerce flourished. But signs of decay & degeneration of the Ahom nobility were visible. High officials for the first time refused to go on active service.¹⁴ Hindu influence percolated and the society became priest-ridden. Patriotic fervour and martial valour were being strangled by sectarian disputes.

The dark patches of clouds of Moamaria discontents which were looming large since the reign of Gadhadar Singha burst into a terrible catalysm during the reign of Lakshmi Singha (1769-1780). But the first Moamaria Rebellion did not last long. A counter revolution of the Royalists crushed the movement easily and led to the restoration of the king.

Lakshmi Singha was succeeded by Gourinath Singha - who was also a staunch Sakta. He lost no time to oppress and exterminate the Moamarias. The severities of inhuman persecution led the Moamarias to rise into rebellion for the second time. But the challenge proved to be abortive and ended in a fiasco. Now Gourinath let loose a reign of terror. The atrocities fanned the flame of disaffection all the more. Desperate Moamarias rose into rebellion for the third time. The tide of rebellion engulfed the kingdom and the fall of the monarchy seemed eminent. Gourinath escaped his impending doom with the help of the company.¹⁵ Though suppressed the third Moamaria rebellion made the Ahom monarchy the 'sickman of Assam' whose death was a foregone conclusion.

The final blow came from the Burmese invasion to which it succumbed in 1826 A.D..

The irony of fate is that the waxing of the sun of Hinduism in the Ahom Court and its gradual rise to the full meridian was unfortunately followed by the waning of the glory and glamour of the Ahom kingdom.

Reviews & overviews

During the early phase of the Ahom rule the kings were indifferent to Hindu religion of the indigenous people. May be they were busy in consolidating their authority in the newly-founded kingdom. The Hindu influence, which made its first appearance in the Ahom Kingdom during the reign of Sudangpha, was shy and slow in penetration and informal in character.

Jayadvaj Singha gave official recognition to Hindu faith. Mahapurushia Vaishnavism was their cult of choice and toleration and compromise were the keynote of the policy of Ahom Kings. ¶

A sudden change in the traditional Ahom religious policy is noticed in the rulers of the Tungkhongia Dynasty. Gadhadar-Singha's reversal of this religious policy proved fatal for the kingdom. Royal favour for Saktatism divided the subjects into two hostile groups-the Privileged Saktas and the persecuted Vaishnavas and the Moamarias. In fact it led to opening of the Pandora's box. Henceforth Moamaria discontents began to appear like tiny speck of clouds on the political horizon of the kingdom. Temporary suspension of the Policy of prsecution by Rudra Singha everted cataclysm for the time being. But the renewal of the policy of persecution by Lakkhursingh and Gourinath Singha hastened the process of thickening and darkening of those clouds. Gradually the sky became overcast and the Moamaria Revolution sparked off the the conflagration.

Behind the policy of obscurantism and opportunism of the Tungkhungia rulers there lay a logical defensible principle - preservation of the kingdom and continuation of the Ahom rule. Thus, they were driven by the very necessity of self-preservation to the policy of the 'patronise and persecute' or 'repression & concession' or 'the kick and kiss' - which was like the divide & rule policy of modern times.

It is generally believed that the Hinduisation and integration of the Ahom nobility were the outcome of a deliberate policy of the Ahom kings.¹⁶ Being conscious of the numerical inferiority the Ahom rulers sought to gain strength by the inter-mingling of blood,

religion, language and culture. There is no doubt the Ahom were the first political power to convert this land from being a geographical expression to a political unity named Assam.¹⁷ This political unity was cemented by the golden alchemy of neo-vaishnavism of Sankardeva. Unlike the Turko-Afgan rulers of Delhi the Ahoms did not keep extra-territorial allegiance for either political or cultural inspiration. They totally cut off their connection with their home land. In spite of their gradual leanings towards Hinduism they did not give up their Ahom religious rites & rituals. They tried to maintain a balance. This dual loyalty ultimately resulted in a cultural synthesis which is the present Assamese culture.¹⁸ It is more probable that the integration of the Ahoms was the outcome of a gradual assimilation instead of being deliberate policy.¹⁹ Whatever might have been the process, there is no shadow of doubt that it gave birth to a new Assamese nationality in spite of the fact that like America, Assam is also a melting pot of India, though not of the world. Now the 'Ahom' became a name only signifying the ruling class; for all practical purposes it was the Assamese State.²⁰

The tie of the golden cord of Hinduism was so tight that during Muslim invasions in the sixteenth & seventeenth centuries both the Ahom ruling class & the non-Ahom subjects of the Kingdom stood against the invaders like a solid block and fought tooth and nail for the sake of country's independence. The eternal vigilance and burning patriotism of the Ahom fighting force & the monolithic unity of the subjects were fully rewarded. The gaint was killed by the dwarf. The myth of Mughal invincibility was exploded.

In the Medieval Age when all northern Indian Hindu kings lay prostrate at the feet of the Turko-Afgan Mughal rulers of Delhi the Ahom rulers had the unique distinction of preserving the separate entity and solidarity of Hindu Ahom kingdom keeping the flag of her independence flying.

Nay, the Ahom kings acted as the door-keepers to the land route to the south East Asia as Prithviraj Chowhan, the Rajput king of Delhi & Ajmir had been to the Gangetic valley. But while Prithviraj was defeated in the Battle of Tarai in 1192 A.D. by Muhammad Ghuri the Ahom rulers successfully repulsed Muslim penetration into Assam as well as South East Asia. The Ahom rulers thus earned unique distinction of retarding the expansion of Muslim rule and the spread of Islam and Arabic culture in that region by land route. In this way the Ahoms indirectly contributed towards the preservation Ancient

Indian culture of those places.²¹

If the Muslim invaders succeeded in their attempt to penetrate into South East Asia through the land route of Assam the whole of that region would have come under their political domination and Islamisation. The relic of ancient Indian culture which are found there even today would have been completely destroyed.²² In that case Assam would have to reap a very terrible harvest in the shape of the loss of her independence, religion and cultural heritage and the history of the entire north eastern region would have taken a completely different course. Fortunately for Assam, the Nemesis did not take such dangerous fancy in favour of the Turko-Afgan-Mughal expansionists.

To sum up, the wonderful magical power of Hinduism to bring others within its fold which proved so successful in Hinduising and Indianising foreign rulers and races of Pre- and early Christian era, unfortunately proved itself quite ineffective and a spent up force in the Medieval period of India. The Turko-Afgan-Mughal rulers were not at all prone to Hindu assimilating power. This repulsive and hostile attitude of the foreign rulers of Delhi towards Hinduism had caused horror and havoc in the cultural domain of Medieval India.

This failure of Hinduism in Northern India was, however, compensated partially by the glorious achievements in the north eastern region. Fortunately, in the Ahom kingdom the efforts of the Hindu adventurous priests in the task of Propagation of Hinduism in the Ahom Court was crowned with grand success. Thus a paradise lost in the Gangetic valley was regained in this land of the 'Blue Hills and the Red River'.

Notes & References

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