

# Some Thoughts on Continuity and Change in Ahom Society

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In the social and cultural history of Assam from the thirteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century, far-reaching changes in political, social, religious and cultural spheres took place. During this period the Ahoms ruled over Assam for six hundred years.

The Ahoms came to this land not with an intention to go back, but to settle like the sons of the soil. They first established themselves as ruling power by bringing the whole of the Brahmaputra valley from Sadiya to the river Manaha under their domination.

The advent of Siu-Ka-Pha was an epoch making event and a turning point in the history of Assam. It was perhaps the political turbulence in the Mao-Shan empire that compelled Siu-Ka-Pha to leave his home-land. The aggressive design of the Siu-Ka-Pha, the Mao-Shan chief, towards the Tai chief and the concentration of power in his own hands to carry on his expansionist policy led to discontent among them and the political frustration arising out of it eventually forced Siu-Ka-Pha to leave king Seng-Mao-Ling.

When Siu-Ka-Pha landed in this land he had to face resistance the the Morans and the Borahis.<sup>1</sup> The Tais under Siu-ka-Pha established themselves as a cohesive ruling power apart from and above their new subjects. On the other hand, the native people willingly consented to the authority thus giving a legitimacy to the Tai political hegemony in Upper Assam.

The policy of tolerance was another hallmark of the beginning of the Ahom rule and they never tried to impose their religion and language on the people in the conquered territory. On the other hand, by accepting the language and the dialects and by respecting their religion, they paved the way for emergence of a composite ethnic identity.

The important contribution of Siu-Ka Pha was his great sense of history. It is said that he ordered his priests at Khamjang to recount the incidents which took place during his sojourn to Mung-Dun-Shun-Khan

(Assam) and also the names and description of the people and the places. This is undoubtedly the beginning of writing history of Assam in a scientific manner.

The Ahoms had a strong and stratified society with the king, ministers and the commoners. Earlier they lived in politically organised society and their leader Chau-Lung-Siu-Ka-Pha had the political experience in ruling his paternal kingdom. There were only some marginal differences in the traditional culture of the migrant Ahoms. They were technically advanced in their “wet-rice” agriculture and “Bara-rice” with the capacity for surplus productions with the knowledge of transplantations of rice plants.

The Ahoms proved to be a unifying factor and patrons of Hindu culture and faith amongst the non-Aryan tribes by accepting Assamese as the lingua franca of the state. In fact, during the rule of the Ahoms, they completely merged themselves with the people of the soil and succeeded in bringing all-round development of the country with the co-operation of all, which was damaged in the later centuries by the Moamaria insurrections and the Burmese invasions.

The growth of Assamese culture was also facilitated by the language policy of the Ahoms. Ahom words, expressions and ideas found easy access into Assamese language and literature particularly through the Buranjis.

The conversion of the Ahoms into Hinduism also changed their outlook on life and human relations and politics.

Hindu influence entered the Ahom court during the reign of king Sudangpha alias Bamuni Konwar and the same became marked in the reign of the Ahom king Pratap Singha. Jayadhvaj Singha was formally initiated to Hinduism but his successors upto to king Su-Lik-Pha alias Lora Raja were initiated to Vaisnavism. King Gadadhar Singha bestowed royal patronage upon the Saktas and he persecuted the Vaisnavas. King Rudra Singha reversed this policy and was tolerant towards the Vaisnava preachers. Siva Singha and his successors Pramatta Singha, Laksmi Singha, Gaurinath Singha were devoted patrons of Saktism. The Ahom monarchs followed a religious policy of toleration and this toleration made them popular amongst their subjects.

The Ahom kings considered themselves as descendants of God Indra and the royal dynasty was known as Indra-Vamsa. The Ahom gods and

religious myths and legends came to be identified with Hindu gods and goddesses. They brought about a cultural synthesis.<sup>2</sup> Hinduism made a considerable progress in the Ahom court during the reign of the Ahom king Pratap Singha alias Su-Cheng-Pha (A.D. 1603-1641). He was a devotee of Siva and Saivism became a popular religion amongst his subjects. It was at his instance that people from Assam were sent to Koch Behar to learn the art of making earthen images of Goddess Durga and some artists were brought to Assam for permanent settlement.<sup>3</sup>

During the reign of King Jayadhvaj Singha (A.D. 1648-1663) Vaisnavism entered the Ahom palace for the first time and it continued to receive royal recognition upto the reign of king Sulikpha. King Jayadhvaj Singha, for the first time issued grants to different religious institutions and individuals.<sup>4</sup> But the table turned during the reign of Ahom king Rudra Singha (A.D. 1696-1714), he himself was initiated to Vaisnavism by Harideva Bapu of Auniati Satra. But in the later part of his life he became a strong supporter of Sakta faith, and he established one Krisnaram Bhattacharyya of Bengal at Nilachala hill giving land and other facilities. His son Siva Singha was highly influenced by the Sakta faith and came to receive royal recognition from the Ahom Kings. His consort, queen Phuleswari began to show more regard to Saktism, as a result the Moamarias became highly infuriated with the Ahom Kings.<sup>5</sup>

During the Ahom rule dress, ornaments and other luxury articles were produced in Assam. The dress and other garments were generally made of cotton, eri, muga and silk. The dress and garments made of muga and silk (pat) were not allowed to be worn by common people.

Brahmanical rituals were observed when the Ahom Kings married Hindu girls; but when the kings married Ahom girls, they performed *Chaklang* marriage system which is practised among a section of the Ahoms even today.

The Ahoms who came with the first conqueror Siu-Ka-Pha, to Assam were very small in number; therefore, they married girls in Assam and merged with the non-Ahom families of Assam. They warmly embraced all people in their social fold and this added to their political strength. The Ahoms also gave up their own language and adopted Assamese. The change of religion and the gradual change of language from the Tai-Ahom to Assamese produced certain far reaching effects on the Ahom society.

The Tai Ahoms are divided into two sects – “Keccha” and “Pacca” - with separate prayer houses (Nam-Ghar). Only a few Ahom families are

still keeping alive their ancestral worship of Umpha-Sai-Pha and Me-Dum-Me-Phi has been revived as public function among the Ahoms.

The ritualistic practices of the Ahom worship continued till the end of their rule in the Brahmaputra Valley. But with the diminishing influence of the Ahom King, Jayadhva Singh (A.D. 1648-1663), received "Saran" from a vaisnava Gosain Niranjan Bapu in the year (A.D. 1654). He assumed a Hindu name. Niranjan Bapu was the first Satradhikar of the Auniati Satra in Majuli in the present district of Jorhat. The Satra institution played an important role not only in the field of religion but in other fields also. Even after adoption of Hinduism they performed the Ahom funeral ceremonies 'Maidam dia'. This funeral ceremony continued among a section of the Ahoms.

Although the Ahoms gave-up their own language and adopted Assamese language, yet by adopting the religion and language of their subjects, some words of the Ahom or Tai language entered the Assamese language, and those words continue till now, i.e.

| Ahom Words | Assamese Words |
|------------|----------------|
| Tup        | Tup            |
| Rup        | Rup            |
| Chut       | Chut           |
| Chang      | Chang          |
| Jup        | Jup            |
| Lik-chou   | Lik-chou       |
| Jee        | Jee            |
| Khang      | Khang          |
| Jan        | Jan            |
| Ling-Lung  | Ling-Lung      |
| Phai       | Phai           |

Though the Ahoms forgot their Tai language but they did not forget their words of the hereditary relation. So, the Ahoms even today use words such as :

|          |   |                              |
|----------|---|------------------------------|
| Nichadeo | - | Elder brother of the parents |
| Epadeo   | - | Wife of Nichadeo             |
| Enaideo  | - | Grand mother                 |
| Puthadeo | - | Grand father                 |
| Athao    | - | Grand mother                 |

|       |   |       |
|-------|---|-------|
| Kai   | - | Kakai |
| Aputi | - | Bopai |

Names of places like Tipam, Teak, Makum, Khumtai, Tirup, Namti, Darika, Namchang, Nam-chai, Charaideo, Safrai, Nam-rup, Khowang, Bakata etc, remind us of the Ahom heritage.

The Ahoms were expert in wood works. According to R.M. Nath, the Ahoms had their efficiency in wooden works. He is of the opinion that under the domination of the Ahoms the stone sculpture of Assam was replaced by the solid wood carving.<sup>6</sup>

Although the Ahoms changed their original food habits, yet some of the items of their foods like khar, wet-rice, bara-rice, kharisa, betelnut, pan and sag are important food items for the Assamese even today.

By following the Hindu way of life they created a new culture and environment of Assamese society. Worship is still going on in the temples built by the Ahoms. The valuable contribution of the Ahoms to life and culture of Assam have become the perpetual inheritance of the Assamese people.

#### *Notes and References*

1. H.K. Barpujari (ed), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. II, Guwahati, 1990, p. 13.
1. N. K. Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age (1228-1826)*, Calcutta, 1970.
2. *Ibid.*
3. S.K. Bhuyan *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, 1949, P.10.
4. S.K. Bhuyan *Op. cit.* p. 203.
5. *Ibid*, p. 100
6. R.N. Nath, *The Background of Assamese Culture*, Shillong, 1948.