

The Ahom Monarchy : Succession to the Throne

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The Ahoms, rather the Tai-ahoms, were a branch of the great Tai race of South East Asia, who ruled the Brahmaputra valley for a period of nearly six hundred years from the early part of the thirteenth century. They established a monarchical form of government quite peculiar to themselves.

In conformity with their tradition, the Ahom kings traced their descent from Lengdon, the ruler of the upper Kingdom of the Ngai-Lao Shans of Yunnan and Sze-chuan of the sixth century A.D.

It is evident from the historical chronicles of the Ahoms that the kingship was hereditary among the descendants of their progenitor Lengdon. Such an analogous form of kingship was also prevalent among the Shans and the Siamese (Thais)².

It was customary among the Ahoms that on the death of a monarch, the throne passed on to prince of royal blood. As a rule, the eldest son born of the principal queen called the *Bor-Konw-ari* (in Assamese) often succeeded to the throne if not otherwise disqualified. This procedure was followed³ because of the practice of polygamy by the kings. In this context, the Siamese (Thai) kingship offered a close parallel, and the succession to the Siamese throne was governed by the law of 1360 A.D. which postulated that the eldest son of⁴ the principal queen was eligible to the throne.

With regard to the eligibility of the eldest son of the Ahom king to the throne, it might be said that his claim might be set aside if he was found imbecile and incompetent. In that case the eldest son would be superseded by a

younger one. Much however, depended on the expressed will of the monarch at the time of selection.

In the case of failure to select a prince from among the sons and brothers of the king, the sons of the brother next in seniority to the former monarch had a better chance of gaining the throne. The Chief Nobles or the Councillors exercised their right in selecting one of the relatives of the late monarch on the basis of personal merit⁵. There was, however, one essential qualification in the Tai-Ahom tradition which expressed that no one could aspire after the throne unless he were a prince of royal blood⁶. The enthroned monarchs of the Ahom Kingdom were the descendants of Shao Hso-Hpa, the founder of the Ahom dynasty in the Brahmaputra valley. This customary procedure remained in vogue throughout the rule of the Ahoms in the country. Prime Minister Atan Buragohain was well aware of his limitations and had the insight to refuse the kingly crown when offered that "I am a Minister, and hence, I cannot become the King."

With the passage of time a number of royal houses known as Saringiya, Tipamia, Dihingiya, Namrupiya, Tungkhungiya and Samaguriya were created which facilitated the selection of candidates for the throne from among the princes⁷ of the collateral branches of the royal family. Such a measure put a stop to the chances of internal feuds and rivalries among the claimants to the throne. It seems that the princely estates of the Tai-Ahoms were reminiscent of the custom of the early Tai⁸. And among the Shans it was the habit to place relatives of the ruling chief as princes in outlying provinces.

In the early periods of Ahom rule succession to the throne was based on the principle of inheritance by the eldest son without any bar except a few exceptions under extraordinary circumstances. But from the latter period of the seventeenth

century a novel idea of eligibility to throne gained currency in the kingdom. The novel idea seemed to have expressed that the monarch's person being of divine origin must be sacrosanct and free from any mark or blemish whether natural or artificial. The political consequence of such a novel idea was looked upon with great disdain and suspicion by the princes.

The period beginning from the reign of Chao Hso-Lik-Hpa or Lora Raja (1679-1681 A.D.) mutilation of princes was adopted in order to disqualify princes from making a bid for the throne. The desired object was realised in most cases by splitting the ear was considered "comparatively merciful way of rendering the sufferers ineligible"¹⁷. The matter even went further when rival princes were assassinated to make the ruling king's position secure. Chao Hso Lik-Hpa or Lora Raja started a reign of terror¹² by killing or maiming a number of princes. The prospects of all the heirs presumptive and near relations of the ex-king were extinguished by some mutilation such as, putting out eyes, mutilating noses, or ears and cutting off a finger, a hand or a foot¹³.

From what has been stated earlier it is clear that one essential qualification for a prince to ascend the throne was his royal blood and a direct descendant of Chao Hso-Ka-Kpa on the male line. Normally, kingship passed on from father to son. Where the procedure was normal the Councillors nominated the new king to the throne acting in unison. The throne, passed on to near relatives only when the heir presumptive was found to be inept and inefficient. A departure from the existing rule of succession to the throne was, however, noticed when the four sons of Ho-Khrung Hpa (1696-1714) or Rudra Singha ascended the throne one after another. This deviation was due to the death-bed injunction of the king who had expressed that "old and young, you shall all be king successively"¹⁴. The four sons who

ascended the throne in succession were Hso-Tan-Hpa or Siba Singha (1714-1744 A.D.), Hso-Rem-Hpa or Rajeshwar Singha (1751-1769 A.D.) and Hso-Nyeu or Lakshmi Singha (1769-1780 A.D.). Yet another departure from the existing procedure of the Ahoms might be noted when Hso-Tam-La or Jayadhvaj Singha offered the crown to Banamali Gosain, the Head of the Neo-Vaisnavite institution of Dakhinpat, who was reported to have ruled the kingdom for sometime and then the crown was offered to Hso-Pung-Mung or Chakradhvaj Singha (1663-1669 A.D.)¹⁵. The offer of the crown to the religious preceptor was something extraordinary as the king was not in his normal state. He was in a dying condition.

In case of failure to find a suitable candidate to the throne from among the princes, the Councillors took over the administration of the kingdom. The exercise of this power could be noticed on two occasions covering a period of twelve years from 1376-1380 A.D. and 1389-1397 A.D. when the country¹⁶ was managed by the Councillors without kings. This, however, did not affect the stability of the kingdom.

The practice of debarring a prince from ascending the throne on grounds of scar or blemish on his body whether natural or artificial, started from the middle of the seventeenth century. Thus a novel theory of kingship was started which postulated that person of the king being of divine origin should be free from any kind of physical deformity. Goaded by this novel theory Chao Hso-Lik-Hpa or Lora Raja unleashed a reign of terror by mutilating a number of princes. Even the mighty prince Hso-Pat-Hpa or Gadador Singha had to flee for life and stubbornly fought the vicissitudes to gain the throne.

The novel idea of kingship of the Ahoms was reinforced by the divinity of the person of the monarch. The Hindu concept of divine origin of the Ahom kings supported all the more the theory of mutilation as a bar to royal

dignity. The time corresponded to the initiation of the Ahom Kings into Hinduism when the Hindu concept of kingship infiltrated into body politic of the Ahom system of administration largely through the Brahmanical priesthood. To glorify the person of the king, such terms as Swarganarayan, Swargadev or Swargadeo were freely used. Kings were equated with gods. There was thus a halo of divinity hanging round the monarchs. It was because of the divine essence of kingship that the person of the monarch appeared to be sacrosanct and inviolable. Further, contact with Hinduism and its proselytising activities attributed divinity to the Ahom kings contrary to their concept of kingship.

The practice of mutilating princes prior to the reign of Chao Sulik-Hpa (1679-1681 A.D.) or Lora Raja was unknown to the Ahoms. A close examination of Ahom chronicles hardly give any evidence of the advocacy of the theory that the king's person must be free from any scar or injury. The Ahoms were essentially a fighting people. In the earlier period of their rule, they were engaged in fighting the local tribes such as the Nagas, the Chutiyas and the Kacharies besides sending periodic expeditions against some of the hill-tribes of North-Eastern region to put a stop to their raids on the border areas of the kingdom. Further, the western expansion of their kingdom brought the Ahoms in direct conflict with the Mughals. That apart, the Moamaria rebellion of the mid-eighteenth century engaged the Ahoms to combat the rebel sections. In the time of wars, revolts and uprisings the princes themselves commanded their respective forces. Under these circumstances, it was therefore, highly improbable that their persons would be free from injuries. It may be noted that while fighting against Turbak Hso-Kleng-Mung or Gargayan Raja (1539-1552 A.D.) received serious wounds¹⁷. Hso-Kham-Hpa or Khora Raja (1552-1603 A.D.) the son and successor of Hso-Kleng-Mung was known as lame king as he had received injuries on his leg while out on an elephant prior to his succession to the throne¹⁸.

From the events just mentioned it may be concluded that in the earlier periods of Ahom rule no disqualifying marks debarred a prince of royal blood from securing the throne. It was only from the middle of the seventeenth century that the novel idea of mutilation gained ground in the kingdom. Besides, the idea of divine monarchy sanctified the concept of Ahom monarchy. Even so, the basic idea of kingship of the Ahoms remained unaffected. On ascending the throne, an Ahom king would be called Chao-Hpa and remained so throughout his rule.

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