

The Ahomisation Process in Early Mediaeval Assam

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There was seemingly an Ahomisation process in the emerging Ahom state during the period from 1228 to 1397. Unfortunately, we do not have enough data on this period. The chronicles contain only few passages about Siu-Ka-Pha, the founding father of the Ahom state and very few lines on others recording the dates of accessions and deaths. Siu-Ka-Pha's sojourns from place to place beginning from Tipam to Charaideo in search of good cultivable lands, have been well recorded. He spent about twenty five years for this. These places were within the three river valleys of the Buridihing, the Desang and the Dikhow—all tributaries to the Brahmaputra river. These three river valleys became the nucleus in the formation and consolidation of the new Ahom state.

During this period, there is no record of any major conflict. Siu-Ka-Pha too, did not resort to any impolitical wanton aggressions. He left the autocthonous to live as they were. He occupied only the low lying fallow lands suitable for wet rice agriculture. The hydraulic culture of the Ahom manifested itself in opening up three vast paddy fields that of Engerua, Gachikala and Borakhowa in the vicinity of Charaideo.

Further, as the chronicles record, there were *inter-regnums* as many as three times during which the nobles ruled the state cohesively. The conflict with the Chutiya kingdom also began in this period when the Ahom king Siu-Teo-Pha (1364-76) was killed treacherously in 1376 by the Chutiya king. Besides, internal conflicts also appeared during the rule of Siu-Khram-Pha (1332-1364) in the revolt of the Prince Chao-Pu-Lai against the king.

However, in the wake of the Ahomisation processes we may look here into the economic and political socializations, the assimilations and acculturations in the Ahom formations in its very early stage.

Economic and Political Socialisations

The ecology of the land occupied, animated the early Ahoms to launch their hydraulic culture in right earnest. Extraction of tributes,

exploitation of the labour force to acquire more agricultural surplus and coercion continued with state terror¹ sometimes showering benefices upon those supporting the authority structure and with the constructions of roads and communications as measures of social welfare. These constituted the basic ingredients and were co-related to the socio-political organizations by introducing the *pyke/khel* system. However, the important point is the capacity of the state to absorb more people. Since the state includes not only the subjects but also the citizens,² it needs some separate means to relate them to the state structure. The evolution, growth and the final institutionalization of the *pyke/khel* system was such a means that emerged through the ossification of the labour utilization processes in the interest of the ruling class *vis-à-vis* the state. Otherwise also, this was at the root of all major changes in the multi-ethnic society of the times that the on-growing Ahom political system had to adopt. It is through this that the emerging state could ensure its power by controlling the subjugated people and thereby the modes of production, particularly when this was closely related to the practice of wet rice cultivation.

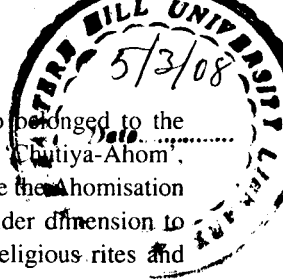
With this, the social relations were marked by an oceanic-pyramydic, and horizontal-vertical pattern. The net outcome of the Ahom rule at the initial stage was man-power grabbing for the purpose of exploitation founded upon their hydraulic culture. The historical process in the emergence of the Ahom state suggests that these social classes had not taken shape in the bog of a declining autochthonous social classes but in the travails of a new. The dissolution of the autochthonous states did not end in the subjugation alone but in the development from the royal benefices and patronage, leading to a sort of feudalism.

Acculturation and Assimilation

The Ahoms ever remained numerically poor in the land in which they made their permanent home. Having had no prejudice in their commensality and connubium practice, they possessed remarkable capacities for assimilations. Following their Shan-Tai heritage, the assimilation became an accelerating factor in their state building process. The characteristic Tai assimilating qualities have been well observed by George Codes.

“Throughout the whole of their history the Tais have always had a remarkable capacity for assimilation, wherever they settled, they have always been able to acquire the cultural traits necessary for the process of raising themselves to the level of most enlightened section of the society of their adoption.”³

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This was no exception in case of the Ahom who belonged to the Tai origin. In the chronicles, we come across terms like 'Chutiya-Ahom', 'Kachari-Ahom', 'Moran-Ahom', etc. These fairly indicate the Ahomisation process at the beginning. Phukan attempts to give a wider dimension to this sort of the Ahomisation process. Based on some religious rites and ceremonies of the Ahoms, he observes :

"The Ahom acculturation of the local gods and spirits forms a part of a wider concept. The Ahom monarchs followed the theory that the conquest of a country brought not only the people and land under their control and protection but also objects like hills, rivers, as well as the gods and spirits dwelling therein. With the addition of new land and people, new gods and goddesses of the conquered peoples were also added and hence they must be maintained and propitiated according to established customs."⁴

He finds this Ahomisation process, particularly in the region of Upper Assam where the Ahom first made their initial establishments. Guha also speaks of this assimilative point of the Ahom and observes that:

"There, (in Upper Assam) the Ahoms assimilated some of their Naga, Moran, Borahi neighbours and later also large sections of the Chutiya and Kachari tribes. This Ahomisation process went on until the expanded Ahom society began to be Hinduised from the mid-16th century onwards."⁵

While the assimilative capacity of the Ahom is agreed to by all, Guha finds the reason for this Ahomisation process in the liberal matrimony practised by the Ahom and in the identical level of the animistic belief system between the Ahom and autochthonous groups. He finally concludes that this Ahomisation process was followed by the Hinduisation process that brought in enormous changes in the matter of language, living styles, food habits and even in agricultural techniques of the autochthonous people. All these constituted an important dimension in the early formation of the Ahom state.⁶

It is not clear in case of Phukan's contentions, whether assimilation and acculturation are used in the one and same sense,⁷ or to what extent assimilation and acculturation are co-related to the Ahomisation process. Guha also does not explicitly state if later Hinduisation could be a direct effect of the Ahomisation process. However, it is very difficult to conceptualise the term 'assimilation' as it is subject to some misunder-

standings.⁸ Traditional societies cannot of course assimilate in the totality of a state culture. It may adopt only a limited number of traits and the adoption is generally reciprocal. They may also retain some degree of ethnic distinction. This is apparently discernible even in present day situation in Assam. Of course, as a sub-society, they only accommodate the total institutional and structural frame work.

Likewise 'acculturation' also gives a too varied and ambiguous meaning. Change of any kind produced by the interaction of tribal level socio-cultural systems with one another might be distinguished as *transculturation*. At least it remains within trait dissemination.⁹ Therefore, assimilation in the context of the Ahomisation process, appears to us as accommodation. On the otherhand, 'acculturation'¹⁰ or cultural change was the result arising out of the intermingling of two or more cultural systems.

We may look at the situation from a different angle. With their Shan-Tai heritage, the Ahoms displayed assimilative capacity. They were given a new name as 'Ahom' by the local population. Socially, they fully identified themselves with the multi-ethnic groups of the land of their occupation. The new name 'Ahom' legitimized and recognized their political supremacy and leadership. The Ahomisation concept, thus, speaks of a fairly dynamic trend of much wider dimensions, involving as it is, a bit of semanticism.

The conquests of the Moran - Borahi tribes at the initial stage, produced a conquest society. Because, the Ahom neither liquidated nor exterminated the vanquished population and instead, took them as partners of peace and development. However, in the context of conquests, the general process is that the subjugated groups normally adopt the language and custom of the conquerors. The material culture of the conquerors and their language replace those of the conquered or at least, there is a sort of assimilation. Further, it starts with the desire of the subjugated people to attain a higher status by following the cultures of their conquerors. This was at the root of the Ahomisation process. Thus the Ahom, in return, Ahomised some of the leading autochthonous groups in the interest of the ruling class, just as the English Anglicised some of the Indians, if we may say analogically.

But this sort of the Ahomisation process could not continue for long under the new forces of circumstances appearing rapidly. The Ahom continued to remain poor in number. Moreover, in the meanwhile, they decided to make Assam their permanent home. Now the Ahomisation

process would not serve the purpose in state building activities since it might invite more conflicts and contradictions. It of course did, as long as the Ahom territory was confined within the upper Assam region only. But with the expansion of the territory and with the further inclusion of divergent population, it failed to serve the interest of the emerging state. Hence a reverse process took place. The conquerors had no other alternative but to sanction the use of the language and culture of the conquered in the common level of the totality. Ahomisation was replaced by Hinduisation. The conquerors were culturally conquered. The road to statehood was now widely opened.

It is inexplicable in the context of other Tai state formations in Southeast Asia where the Taiisation¹¹ process is conspicuously different from that of the Ahomisation process in early mediaeval Assam.

Notes & References

1. State terror is normally related to the authoritarian norms and values with the information to the subject citizens as to what might happen to those who would not conform to the state authority. Although state terror, in general, arises when the legitimacy of the state is questioned or the state is in an extreme inchoatcy stage. In Ahom's case, it was neither. At the beginning, the Ahom state fully displayed the characteristics of an incorporative state, and hence, political socializations here, is more concerned with the means by which the state could create more loyal citizens in a multi-ethnic syndrome. Such means were the benevolence and welfare programmes along with harsh, sometimes ruthless, punishments like the mutilation of the body etc. in the administration of justice.
2. Ronald Cohen, "State Origins: A Reappraisal" in Claessen and Skalnik, *The Early State*, Mouton Publishers, The Hague, 1978, p. 65.
3. George Coedes, *The Making of South East Asia*, Eng. tr. By H.M.Wright, London, 1966, p.102.
4. J.N.Phukan, "Some Religious Rites and Ceremonies of the Tai-Ahoms", *Lik Phan Tai*, Guwahati, Vol.II. 1981, p.43.
5. Amalendu Guha, "The Ahom Political System (1228-1714" in: *Social Scientist*, Dec., 1983, p. 15.
6. *Ibid.*

7. Brewton Berry, *Race and Ethnic Relations*, 3rd edn., Boston, 1965, p. 217.
Robert Bierstedt, *The Social Order*, 2nd edn., New York, 1963, p.176.
They have shown that assimilation and acculturation are synonymous.
8. Julian H.Steward, *Contemporary Change in Traditional Societies*, Vol.I, London, 1967. p.21.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Acculturation is a term, coined by the American anthropologists long ago. But there is no framework to develop the concepts in a sociological theory. It still continues to be a study in the analysis of swapping particular traits between particular isolate cultures over a particular historical period of times. See, E.R.Leach, *Political System of Highland Burma. A study of Kachin Social Structure*. London School of Economics and political Science, 1954, p.284.
11. For the Taisation process in Southeast Asia, See, George Condominas, *ethnos*, Vol.41:1-IV, 1976, Stockholm. p.19&35.