

Search for Tai-Ahom Identity in Assam

Girin Phukon

At different periods of her history, Assam became a refuge for many people, mostly belonging to the Mongoloid stock and she had also attracted people from other parts of India. Thus there had always been some divergence of language, culture, religion and social customs among her population. In the wake of British rule, the doors of Assam were further thrown open to the free flow of population from the rest of India. And at the same time, with the annexation of some parts of Bengal and North-eastern hill areas, the British gave birth to a greater Assam than had ever existed before. As a result, Assam became more heterogeneous in character. It needs to mention that a process of socio-cultural fusion towards the growth and development of a composite Assamese people and culture was started during the Ahom rule among diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. But under the British rule this process became weak leading to clashes of interest among them. Even the Tribals (both hills and plains) and the Ahoms who once ruled over Assam, wanted to preserve their distinct identity within larger Assamese society. They did not want to merge their culture completely with the dominant Assamese caste Hindu culture and developed a non-integrative tendency. As a means of maintaining distinct identity, they demanded the constitutional safeguards of their respective ethnic identities. At the advent of independence of the country this type of sectional patriotism became so strong among a section of these people that this led them to demand a sovereign independent state outside Indian Union as a measure of maintaining their identities. The urges for maintaining distinct identity among the ethnic groups of Assam is still a living phenomenon. More importantly, the Ahoms, who made immense contribution in the formation of greater Assamese society, have still been struggling for maintaining distinct Ahom identity. In this paper, however, an endeavour would be made to examine the legacy of this struggle.

II

The 'Ahoms', a tribe of Shans in northern Burma, came into the plains of Assam in 1226 A.D. and established their kingdom comprising in course of time the whole of Assam Valley. In fact, they were the representatives of the great Tai-race of the Mongolians who now inhabit the vast regions of south-east Asia. It is this group which gave to Assam its modern name and in course

of time they had even identified themselves with the Assamese. The Ahom had been the latest rulers of the Assam Valley and after six centuries of their rule in Assam, the British had taken over the country from them in 1826. But they could not forget the tradition of freedom and independence which they had been enjoying for such a long time. As in many other parts of India, the traditional ruling elite who had lost their power objected to the new power system. They did not relish the prospect of losing not only the powers and privileges that they enjoyed in the past but also their former social status and position of influence under the new order of things. Being a ruling race it was a natural inclination among the Ahoms to get back their lost power and position.

Therefore, the Ahoms were hostile towards the British rule and along with other ruling groups of this region they started movement against the British. In effect, the British did not recruit the Ahoms into the responsible positions of the government. They systematically followed a policy of discrimination against the Ahoms in matters relating to employment and deprived them of other benefits of the new economic order. The Assamese upper caste elite, who had held important positions in bureaucracy even during the Ahom rule, obviously took advantage of this situation. Thus they occupied a dominant position in the government and commercial undertakings under the British rule. On the other hand, since the Ahoms could not reap any meaningful benefit from the British Administration, they became "Backward" educationally, socially, and even economically. The Ahom elite, therefore, thought that they were deprived of their due share of administrative jobs and other privileges under the British Government. Considering their contribution to the history of Assam and their number, they felt that they deserved much more than what they could achieve.¹ It appeared to them that from a position of dominance, they sank to the position of "Backwardness". Indeed, the Ahoms left a deep and indelible impression on Assamese society during the six centuries of their rule. They made formidable contribution in the consolidation of Assamese society and they were absorbed into the Hindu Social Structure. Therefore, rightly or wrongly most of the Ahoms believed that their attachment to Hinduism was the root cause of their degradation.² In view of this, they opposed the proposed scheme for tabulating the 'Ahoms' as 'Hindu' in the census operation of 1941 and demanded that the word 'Ahom' be retained in the census report.³ Thus it appears that the Ahoms felt a sense of deprivation during the British rule and for this reason they became increasingly conscious of their distinct identity. Since the late nineteenth century they gradually began to organize themselves in order to remove their socio-economic backwardness which culminated in the formation of the All Assam Ahom Association in 1893 (subsequently renamed as the 'Ahom Sabha'). It stood for the preservation of distinct ethnic identity of the Ahoms. Although, the Ahoms adopted the Assa-

mese language as their mother tongue leaving their original Tai language and started the process of formation of a greater Assamese society, they did not want that the 'Ahom identity' should completely be submerged by the Assamese caste Hindu culture.

By and large, there developed a contradiction between the Ahoms and the Assamese caste Hindus regarding their power status in the society. As mentioned earlier, the Assamese caste Hindus became the dominant community in Assam both culturally and politically. When the national movement developed in Assam, the Congress organization came to be entirely dominated by the caste Hindus. Therefore, a section of the Ahoms characterised the Congress in Assam as the "League of the Caste Hindus." They believed that the Congress was an enemy of the Ahoms and hence asked the Ahoms to boycott the "Assamiya", as they thought it was the mouth piece of the Congress.⁵ At any rate, the Ahom elite felt much anxiety for lack of their power and position. Eventually, the Ahom Association led a unity move among all the Mongoloid communities in Assam and formed a greater alliance among them to counter the monopoly of the caste Hindus in the affairs of the province.⁶ As a part of this effort, the Ahom elite played an active role in the formation of "All peoples' party"⁷ (popularly known as 'Sarba Doll') on March 8, 1948 to fight against the Congress, which they believed, as an organization of the Caste Hindus. For this purpose, they even joined hands with the Muslim League.⁸ They, however, asserted that the Ahom is an inseparable part of the larger Assamese society and the upliftment of the Ahoms would ultimately serve the greater interest of the Assamese society.⁹ Thus while endorsing this view, they argued that "the rise of the Ahoms" was essential for the progress of the Assamese people as a whole.¹⁰ It therefore, seems obvious that the Ahom elite wanted to maintain their distinct identity within the Assamese society regaining their dominant position in the province. As a measure of maintaining distinct identity and for prosperity of the Ahoms, they demanded the recognition of the Ahoms as the "Minority Community" and "Separate electorate" for them. While demanding minority status for the Ahoms, in a memorandum submitted to the then Government of Assam, the Ahom elite asserted that :

*'The Ahoms as a community are educationally more backward than certain sections of the Schedule Caste and the Hill Tribal populations of the province. . . . It must be mentioned here that this claim of the community for treatment as a minority is being made more as a matter of right than as a matter of favour. . . . The community's position must be estimated not only on its numerical strength but in respect to the political and historical importance of the Community.'*¹¹

Similarly the Ahom elite pleaded for 'Separate electorate' for the Ahoms in a bid to maintain distinct identity. Thus Radha Kanta Handique in his inaugural speech of the tenth annual

conference of All Assam Ahom Association held at Sigbsaar on 5 and 6 April, 1941 maintained :

*This conference will have to come to a calm conclusion as to the nature and extent of safeguards that the Ahoms must claim in this forth coming future Constitution of India. The Conference will further have to decide upon the form of the legitimate struggle which may be necessitated to secure the acceptance of the demand of "separate electorate" for the community.'*¹²

In view of these aspirations of the Ahoms, Surendranath Buragohain moved a Private Member's Resolution in the Assam Legislative Assembly on 20th November, 1943 urging inclusion of the Ahoms among the recognised minorities in the new Constitution of India.¹³ But the resolution failed to evoke sympathetic response in the House, as the Ahom elite complained, 'due to stiff opposition of the ruling party which was dominated by the caste Hindus.'¹⁴ Thus the Ahom elite did not see any ray of hope for protecting the interest of their community in the new Constitution of India.

III

Under the circumstances, the Ahom elite realised that the question of distinct Ahom identity was connected with the maintenance of separate identity of Assam as a whole. They believed that if Assam became free, the influx of non-Mongoloid people from rest of the country could be checked and thus, the Ahoms along with other Mongolians would be in a better position within a sovereign Assam to protect their interest. In view of this, in the middle of the forties, a feeling grew among some of the Ahom elite in favour of an independent political existence for Assam.

The Ahom elite persistently felt that they had a glorious past and that during their rule, Assam had never been conquered by any foreign power and she maintained her sovereignty for a long time. Moreover, since geographically she had remained isolated from the rest of India emotionally the Ahoms developed a sense of alienation from other parts of the country. These factors together with the separation of Burma from India in 1937 and the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan had inspired the Ahom elite to claim for a sovereign independent status for Assam as a means for the preservation of their distinct Ahom identity. In several meetings of the All Assam Ahom Association, both provincial and district levels, resolutions were adopted to this effect. For instance, in an executive committee meeting of the Association held on September 29, 1944 at Sibsagar it was resolved that :

In view of the peculiar position of Assam, both geographically and otherwise, and the great preponderance of the Mongolian race with their distinctive languages, cultures and religions

*in the population of the province, Assam without Sylhet has a legitimate claim for free and independent existence in the event of India being divided territorially into Pakistan and Hindustan Zones and that Mahatma Gandhi and Mr. Jinnah should leave the question of Assam without Sylhet to the people of the soil to settle.*¹⁵

A similar resolution was adopted in a meeting of executive committee of North Bank District Ahom Association held on September 28, 1944 at Lakhimpur which pleaded that "in the event of India being divided into Hindustan and Pakistan, Assam should be separated from India and constituted into a dominion on the basis of history, culture and nationality."¹⁶ It appears while demanding for an independent state, the Ahom elite mainly referred to their history, tradition and culture. They felt that they had a 'legitimate' claim to have dominance in Assam on these grounds. It is, however interesting to note that the dominant section of the Assamese people also very often referred to the same history and tradition in order to generate 'Assamese national' consciousness. It could, of course, be argued that the caste Hindus were not a part the ruling groups which created this history. And unlike the caste Hindus, the Ahom elite, therefore, felt that they had a 'legitimate' claim to remain separate from the rest of India so as to maintain distinctness of Assam which was formed under their impact.

The Ahom Association however, wanted to make the demand for "sovereign independent state" a common issue of all the tribes and races of Assam. It needs to mention that the Ahoms and the Tribals (both in the hills and the plains) felt much closer to each other due to their cultural affinities; because fundamentally all of them belonged to the Mongoloid and the Tibeto-Burman groups distinct from the Aryans. Moreover, the basic problems that they were facing (such as the crisis of identity, the feeling of a sense of deprivation) were similar in nature. Therefore, they tended to unite together and make a common working arrangement in quest of their distinct identity. Thus at the initiative of Ahom Association the "All Assam Tribes and Races Federation" was formed at Shillong in 1944 with the representatives of various tribes and races such as the Ahoms, the Kacharis, the Miris, the Deoris, the Khasis, the Garos, the Nagas, the Lushais, the Mikirs, the Chutias etc.¹⁷ This federation also demanded a sovereign independent status for Assam as a means of safeguarding their distinct identity. Thus in its first convention held at Shillong from 21 to 23 March, 1945 it was unanimously resolved that :

In view of the fact that historically, Assam proper with its hills, was never a part of province of India, and that its people, particularly the tribes and races inhabiting it are ethnically and culturally different from the people of the rest of India, this convention is emphatically opposed to Assam proper

*with its hills being included into any proposed division of India - Pakistan or Hindustan - and demands that it should be constituted into a separate free state into which the Hill Districts bordering Assam be incorporated.*¹⁸

The demand for a separate independent state on the basis history, culture and distinct ethnic identity appeared to them (the Ahoms and the Tribals) quite 'Legitimate' because they were never a part of India prior to the British rule in this region. In fact, it was very much in their mind that they were not completely assimilated with the mainstream of Indian culture till then. More importantly, unlike the Assamese caste Hindus, the tribes and races do not trace their origin to other parts of India. The Ahom Association fully associated with this demand of the "Tribes and Races Federation". Thus in a similar vein Professor Padmeswar Gogoi, a representative of the Ahom Association in the convention maintained :

*Geographically Assam is naturally protected and detached from Hindustan proper. Ethically, Assam is a Mongoloid tract which will naturally afford the best opportunity for the growth of homogeneous and compact society amongst the free indigeneous races and tribes of the land. Historically and politically she has a tradition behind, which is unique and glorious in the history of the Far East and bears eloquent testimony to the fact that Assam can never be a digestible part of India now or in future. Assam has to-day become milch-cow for Hindustan, a cesspool for Bengal and a pawn on the chess board of Indian Politics. We must therefore be prepared to make a supreme effort for the realization of the status of a sovereign state for Assam.*¹⁹

Thus it is evident that only in a sovereign Assam, the Ahom and the Tribal elite felt, their tradition and culture would be well protected. In fact, they apprehended that if Assam was not separated from India, their future destiny would be controlled by the "Hindusthani". They were also thinking that unlike the Mongoloid communities in Assam the Assamese caste Hindus traced their origin to other parts of India. Therefore, even if Assam became a unit of Indian federation, numerical strength of both the Hindus and the Muslims would, in due course, increase in Assam through the influx of people from other parts of India, which would ultimately create the problem of crisis of identity for the Ahoms, Tribals and other Mongoloid communities.

IV

In any case, in the late forties the Ahoms and other tribals of Assam were not sufficiently organized, capable of asserting the demand for sovereign independent Assam. On the other hand, the Indian National Congress in Assam was enough strong

to check the centrifugal urges developed among the Ahoms and the Tribals. Moreover, the prevailing political climate was not favourable for accommodating such a demand. Eventually, in the late forties, when the Constitution was being framed the Ahoms and other tribals elite pleaded for adequate Constitutional safeguards to protect and preserve their distinct ethnic identity. In view of this they jointly pleaded that :

*These communities must be assured separate political existence in the new constitution by providing for them in the case of hills tribes, local autonomy and in the case of others separate electorate. They must be allowed to live their own life with own customs and culture without any encroachment either by the Hindus or by the Muslims.*²⁰

While demanding these special privileges for them in the new Constitution, they asserted the fact that the setting up of autonomous administrative unit among the Ahoms and the tribals was "vital to the peace and tranquility" of this region. As a matter of fact, they warned the Congress leaders that "denial" of their "just rights" might bring "chaos and insecurity" to this most "vulnerable" frontier of India.²¹ Thus it appears that at the advent of independence, the Ahoms and the Tribals both in the hills and the plains pleaded for suitable constitutional safeguards in a bid to maintain their distinct identity. Hence the present urges and movements of the Ahoms and other ethnic groups of Assam for maintaining their distinct identities are to be understood in the context of this legacy.

Notes & References

1. *Sibsagar Zila Ahom Sabhar Karyya Bivarani*, (Booklet in Assamese) December 2, 1940, p. 14.
2. Padamanath Gohain Baruah, *Gohain Baruah Rachanavali*, (in Assamese) Gauhati, 1971, p. 934.
3. *Sibsagar Zila Ahom Sabhar Karyya Bivarani*, op. cit., The Ahom Association even appealed to the Community to engage the Ahom priests instead of Hindu priests in social ceremonies as "Hindu priests and Goswamis create division in the community". (See Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence, 1944, item 467 ; *Sibsagar 29.2.44* cited in A. C. Bhuyan and S. P. De (ed), *Political History of Assam*, Gauhati, 1980, p. 195.
4. *Sabhapatir Avibashan* (In Assamese, printed), All Assam Ahom Sabha, Golden Jubilee Session, *Sibsagar*, 12 & 13 February, 1944.
5. *Sibsagar Zila Ahom Sabhar Karyya Bivarani*, op. cit.
6. *Forward*, Calcutta, April 27, 1935 cited in *Political History of Assam*, op. cit.
7. The "All Peoples Party" was formed with the representatives of Tribal League, Muslim League, Ahom Sabha, Hills Tribes

- and Tea Garden Communities. See, *Sadou Asom Sabha Aru Sarba Dal* (In Assamese; a booklet published by Głana Kanta Gogoi, Secretary, All Assam Ahom Sabha, Dibrugarh, February 1, 1949.)
8. *Gohai Baruah Rachanavali*, op. cit., pp. 944-5 ; It may be noted that Mahammad Sadulla, leader of the Muslim League, was unanimously elected as the Chairman of the "All Peoples' Party" which was formed at the initiative of the Ahoms.
 9. This view was reflected in a speech of Padmanath Gohain Baruah in the Assam Legislative Council (See, *Assam Legislative Council Debates*, Vol. V, April 10, 1913, pp 67-72).
 10. See, statement of Radha Kanta Handique, one of the then leading personalities of the Ahom community. in *The Assam Tribune*, April 25, 1941.
 11. Reported in *The Assam Tribune*, May 2, 1941 ; Also see, *All Assam Ahom Association* . Memorandum on the "Ahoms" as Minority. A Booklet Published by S. N. Buragohain on behalf of the Ahom Minority Right Sub-Committee, Jorhat, July 2, 1941.
 12. Appeared in *The Assam Tribune*, April 25, 1941.
 13. Surendranath Buragohain moved the Resolution as : "This Assembly is of opinion that the Ahom community of this province be included among the recognised minorities for the future Indian Constitution and that the Government of Assam do move the Government of India and His Majesty's Government for consideration and acceptance of the community as such a minority". (See *Ahom Question in Assam Legislative Assembly* : A booklet incorporating the speech of S. N. Buragohain in the Assembly on the issue of "Minority" published by All Assam Ahom Association, Jorhat, November 25, 1946).
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. *All Assam Ahom Association* , *Proceeding of the Executive Committee*, Sibsagar, September 27, 1944 (Manuscripts and Translated from Assamese).
 16. Reported in *The Assam Tribune*, October 6, 1944.
 17. See, Padmeswar Gogoi, "*Future status of Assam*, A booklet published by Rameswar Bora, General Secretary, All Assam Ahom Association, Jorhat, 1945.
 18. Appeared in *The Assam Tribune*, March 28, 1945, p. 3 ; Also see, *Future Status of Assam*, op. cit.
 19. *Future status of Assam*, op. cit.
 20. See, *Demands of the Tribal Communities of Assam* : A memorandum issued by the conference of leaders of Tribal Communities of Assam, Shillong, July 1946, p. 2. Signatories of the Memorandum were - Surendeanath Buragohain, Binode Kumar, J Sarwan, P. M. Satwan, Kaika Doley Miri, Mody Marak, Mavis Dunn, H. Lyngdoh and A. S. Khongphai.
 21. *Ibid.*