

Castes and Tribes of India Series—9

Continuity and Change Among the Ahom



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Nitul Kumar Gogoi

Castes and Tribes of India Series No. 9

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Dr. Gogoi is an experienced field worker and has worked among the Purum/ Chothe of Manipur for his M.Phil Dissertation, entitled "Issues in the Purum Debate". He has also worked among the Assamese Tai-Ahom group in Upper Assam and the present book is the outcome of that study.

Dr. Gogoi has published a number of research paper in various journals of repute and edited books. He has also presented papers in many national and international seminars. His thrust areas of research are mainly Ethnicity, Cultural Ecology, Medical Anthropology, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Folk-narratives and Social Reality etc.

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CONCEPT PUBLISHING COMPANY, NEW DELHI-110059

Cataloging in Publication Data—DK

Courtesy: D.K. Agencies (P) Ltd. <docinfo@dkagencies.com>

Gogoi, Nitul Kumar, 1964-

Continuity and change among the Ahom / Nitul Kumar Gogoi.

p. cm. — (Castes and tribes of India series ; 9)

Anthropological study of the Ahom tribe of Lakhimpukhuri-Jaikhamdang Village, Sibsagar, Assam, India.

Includes bibliographical references.

Includes index.

ISBN 8180692817

1. Ahoms (Indic people)—India—Lakhimpukhuri-Jaikhamdang (Village)—Social life and customs. 2. Lakhimpukhuri-Jaikhamdang (India: Village)—Ethnic relations. I. Title. II. Series: Castes and tribes of India ; 9.

DDC 305.8914 22

305.89 54162
909

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ISBN : 81-8069-281-7

First Published 2006

© Nitul Kumar Gogoi (b. 1964)

Published and Printed by
Ashok Kumar Mittal

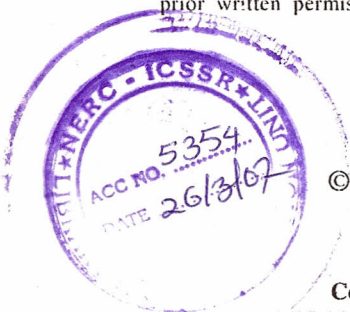
Concept Publishing Company

A/15-16, Commercial Block, Mohan Garden,
New Delhi-110059 (India)

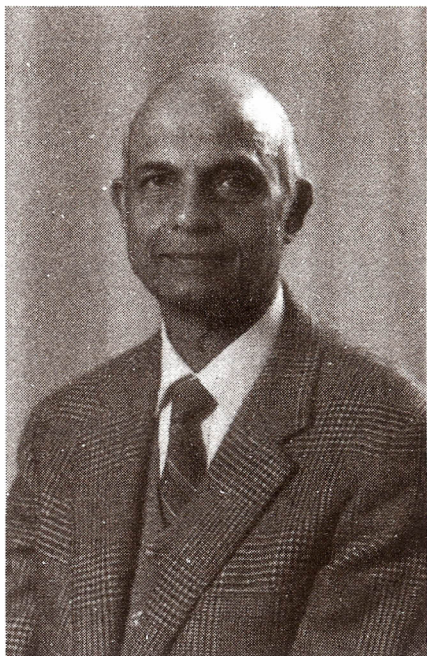
Phones : 25351460, 25351794

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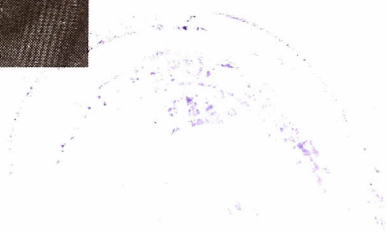


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To My Teacher

PROF. P. K. MISRA



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a student of Anthropology I find 'culture change' as a subject of most intriguing and challenging aspect of Anthropological study. My quest for the subject began during my association with Prof. P. K. Misra, who had been my teacher and academic guide in my M.Sc, M.Phil and Ph.D days. Prof. Misra is known to be an expert in provoking your inner self to wander in to the world of academic 'fantasy'. This book is an out come of his constant thought provoking queries that he had made us to face in course of our many a never ending academic discourse that took place from time-to-time. He often made us wonder on a simple looking matter which at times proves to be the ultimate factor operating within a social phenomenon. His approach to Indian Diaspora, may it be through 'Paratha-Roti' in Trinidad and Tobago Island or through the peripatetic life of the Gadulia Lohars, is very much down to earth.

In this book I have tried my best to critically examine every aspect of the Ahom culture on the basis of the empirical data supplemented by secondary sources of information and have also endeavoured to present a number of generalizations as a student of Anthropology. It is, however, for the other scholars to judge the validity of those generalizations. I do not claim to have said the last word on the Ahoms but believe that I could at least raise certain thought provoking issues and invite the future scholars for further investigation.

I also take this opportunity to acknowledge my indebtedness to my teachers Prof. Promode Kumar Misra, Prof. Aloke Kumar Ghosh and Prof. Tanka Bahadur Subba for their constant support during my field work.

Finally, I am grateful to my wife Jolly, my daughter Disha, my son Debasish and friends and colleagues for giving me immense support while writing this book.

Nitul Kumar Gogoi

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INTRODUCTION

This book examines the processes of change which the Ahoms had to undergo to become what they are today. What they are today has been a perennial question of inquiry for the Ahoms at large. This has also been an academic interest for a long period of time. Different views suggest a 'total loss' of identity and structural change within the group. To an equal extent views advocating a 'static identity' of being the Tai are also often heard which argue in favour of retention of tradition and structural stability. The domain of culture change is very vast and the question of culture change as such, in spite of having enormous volume of literature available on the subject, still remains a perennial question. It is so because of the fact that the problem of change as a process is practically beyond the perception of any time frame.

Acculturation has been the key player in the overall culture change among the Ahoms as they had come in contact with numerous cultures while they were coming down to this part of the country and even thereafter. Such contacts undoubtedly made serious impact on their way of life, some of which the group resisted and some were incorporated into their life style.

The word acculturation was widely accepted among the American Anthropologists as a concept referring to those changes set in motion by the coming together of societies with different cultural conditions (International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, Vol.1:26-6,1968). This field of investigation was generally referred to by British Anthropologists as 'culture contact'. A persistent usage gave the term the meaning of cultural assimilation, or replacement of one set of cultural traits by another, as in references to individuals in contact situation, as more or less 'accultured'.

It developed as an area of Anthropological inquiry in 1980's and became a major field of investigation. It appeared first in the writings of the North Americans like W.H. Holmes (1886), Franz Boas (1896) and W.J. McGee (1898). McGee spoke of 'piratical acculturation' and 'amicable acculturation' meaning transfer and adjustment of

customs and condition of contacts between peoples of 'lower-grades' and 'higher-grades' respectively. Whereas Boas used it in more general sense to refer to those derived processes of change as a result of which the culture of a region becomes similar to one another. Boas's usage gained some support from the German Ethnologists like Ehrenreich (1905) and Krickeberge (1910).

Later the North American Anthropologists concerned themselves increasingly with studying the phenomena of culture change resulting from contact between peoples. Initial studies were directed towards the construction of dead culture of the Buffalo period. From 1930 onwards, attention shifted to the first hand observation of the contact between Indians and Anglo Americans and between native Africans and Europeans. Studies like "Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe" by Margaret Mead (1932) and "Reaction to Conquest" by Monica Hunter (1936) among the Pondo and other natives of South Africa were worth mentioning.

Studies by some contemporary scholars like Herskovits (1927), Redfield (1929), Schapera (1934), and Spier (1935) made acculturation studies an important field of Anthropological investigation. A strong thrust could be seen in 1935 when a committee under the chairmanship of Robert Redfield prepared a memorandum called "Outline for the Study of Acculturation" (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits 1935). The committee sought to define the field that was coming to be called as 'acculturation' and to provide a checklist of topics concerning which data should be gathered if the phenomena defined were to be systematically investigated.

The effort gave birth to a working definition of it which is as follows :

"Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous firsthand contact with subsequent changes in the original cultural pattern of either or both groups" (Redfield *et al.* 1936 : 149).

Efforts were made to identify types and situation of contact, process, psychological mechanism and results. The processes of 'determination', 'selection', and 'integration' were identified respectively, those resulting in the presentation of traits by a 'donor-group' in contact situation, the accepting of traits by a 'receiving group' and 'reaction' recognized the replacement of cultural elements, combination of elements into new wholes, and rejection of elements.

All these features, later, became the basis of analysis of acculturation phenomena. In other words "...acculturation was more or less reciprocal, but incomplete. Each people was also likely to be developing new peculiarities even while it was taking over culture from the other" (Kroeber, 1948/1972 : 428-29).

Acculturation and Diffusion

Acculturation as a concept to study cultural change might at times be seen similar to diffusion. Over the years diffusion came to mean the analysis of similarities and differences between the existing non-literate, and in this sense non-historic cultures. The contacts that presumably took place between peoples had to be constructed, and the reshaping of the borrowed elements inferred from the variations in their forms as manifest in one culture after another. Acculturation on the other hand was applied chiefly to instances where transmission of cultural elements could be more fully documented either by study on the spot, or by the use of documentary data, or both. In summary then, diffusion was the study of 'achieved cultural transmission', while acculturation was the study of 'cultural transmission in process' (Herskovits, 1964 : 170).

Diffusion studies, by and large, assumed that the contacts had taken place between peoples because of the similarities observed between their culture at the time they were studied. The reconstruction of the processes by means of which transmission was made thus became possible by drawing inference from the nature of the materials. Studies on acculturation, however, had the benefit of historic facts that were known or could be obtained. In most cases, acculturation research dealt with contacts in the contemporary period. The conditions antecedent to the contact could be thus discovered, the pre-contact cultures of the people party to it could be ascertained, and the present condition of the cultures set down. In some cases, even the personalities involved in influencing the acceptance or rejection of varied elements could be reached. Where documentation was necessary the welding of cross-disciplinary research which had given rise to a special technique called the ethnohistorical method (Herskovits, 1964 : 171).

In acculturation studies 'contacts' with the other cultures set the process of cultural transmission on; and as such, types of contacts between peoples differed in many respects :

1. Contacts may occur between entire populations, or substantial segments of these populations.
2. They may arise from contacts between smaller groupings or even individuals.
3. It may be a hostile contacts between groups.
4. Between groups of equal or different population sizes.
5. Between groups that differ in the complexity of their material and non-material culture, or the receiving group achieves its contact with new culture in a new habitat.
6. There may be contact through an intermediary group playing the role of 'bridge' or 'buffer' or both at different times or between two powerful groups.
7. The contact may not be necessarily continuous and first hand as perceived by Redfield *et al.*

Acculturation and the Athoms

The Ahoms of Assam seemed to fit into the 3rd and 5th types of contact situations. That acculturation is a two way process was aptly exemplified by the Ahoms who by the first quarter of 13th century had left their original habitat in Yunan, organized themselves politically around 1228 A.D. in Assam. They had tremendous ability of assimilating their neighbours. This was borne out by their chronicles that many a tribe like the Naga, Moran, Borahi, Chutiya, and Kachari were 'assimilated' widely within the Ahom social organization and thus the terms like "Chutiya-Ahom", "Borahi-Ahom", "Kachacri-Ahom", 'Moran-Ahom', "Naga-Bailung", "Miri-Handique", came into being. The process could be called as 'Ahomization' as often referred to by Phukan (1968) and Guha (1987).

In course of time, arising out of their new contacts, many changes took place within their culture leading towards the process of Hinduization that started during the reign of King Sui-dang-pha (Bamuni Konwar, 1337-1407), and got accelerated when king Suhummung (1497-1539) brought under his territory the kingdom of the Hinduized Chutiyas and the present district of Nowgong ruled by the Bara-Bhuyans. The shunning of beef eating, giving up of the pile-house for mud-plinth house, forsaking burial practice and accepting the practice of cremation, to mention a few, are the resultant changes that had occurred.

Indira Barua's (1978) work to some extent could be treated as an acculturation study on the Ahoms though she dealt more with ethnographic data than historical one. All through her thesis she seemed

to have tried to see the 'Tainness' standing distinctively unique and 'to be Tai' as persisting but latent urge within the community.

Rai Sahib Golap Chandra Barua (1930) gave a descriptive account of Tai Ahoms from the earliest time to the end of the Ahom rule.

Lila Gogoi (1961) gave a beautiful description of Ahoms vis-à-vis Assamese culture. He dealt with the Ahom's contribution towards the formation of the greater Assamese society.

Gogoi again (1985) textualized an outline of Tai Ahom culture in detail. The book was a valuable source of information on Ahom culture from historical perspective.

Jotin Borgohain (1989) dealt with the Ahoms in the history of Assamese culture. R. Buragohain (1988) examined the course of Ahom state formation in mediaeval north-east India. Gohain examined a number of theories on the formation of a state. Gohain (1986) dealt with the social stratifications in the Ahom state formation. In the year 1987, he presented a paper on Brahminical influence in the formation of the Ahom state. Gohain (1993) presented another paper on Integration and inter-ethnic relations in the Ahom state of medieval Assam.

K.C. Phukan (1989) presented a paper on Organization of the villagers under the Ahom rule. Mumtaza Khatun (1981) wrote about the marriage relations of the Ahom rulers with the neighbouring ruling families and Debasish Sen (1985) presented a paper on Local influence upon the Ahoms.

Sir Edward Gait (1984) presented a brief political history on Ahoms. He devoted a few pages on the issues like The Rise of the Ahom Kingdom to the Decay and Fall of the Kingdom and The Ahom System of Government (pp. 70-246).

Padmeswar Gogoi's (1968) work presented a detail account of their migrational history.

Amalendu Guha (1987) made an inquiry into the Ahom state formation in Medieval Assam where he talked about the Ahoms mode of production which led to the generation of surplus which in turn was responsible for the formation of the state.

Laksmi Devi (1968) made a political study of the Ahoms and their relations with other tribes of the region. In her book, she dealt with the Ahom administrative policies towards the neighbouring tribes during the six hundred years of the Ahom rule in Assam.

B.J. Terwiel (1980 : Vol I&II) gave a detail account of the Tai culture with comparative case studies on other South-east Asian Tais.

Terwiel here cited mostly the Khamyangs, Phakeys and Khamties of Assam and his treatment of the Ahoms was inadequate.

P.C. Chowdhury (1966) in his *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.*, wrote a few lines on the Ahoms.

S.K. Chatterjee (1950 : 33/55-60) devoted a few pages on Ahoms where he wrote that "...they cultivated their language and wrote *Buranjis* or chronicles in them, a practice which they continued in Assamese after they abandoned Ahom for Assamese". And "...in their political history and their achievements (successful resistance to the Muslims from the west) the Ahoms formed a most important and powerful Indo-mongoloid group in North-eastern India" (*Ibid* : 33). He further wrote "...the Chutiyas had probably been receiving earlier Thai or Ahom immigrants from the east, and they had become considerably intermixed with them..... They and the other Bodo tribe of the Morans, living by the Dibru river, were conquered by the Ahoms; and the Chutiyas were to some extent absorbed by the Ahoms. The Ahoms, it would appear were forced to take wives from among their Bodo subjects, and it is thus likely that they approximated more and more with original people. But it was certainly a clear indication of their being a real *Herrenvolk* in Assam, that they were able to keep their institutions intact, and even to improve them, and held on to their language for five centuries" (*Ibid* : 56).

B.K. Kakati (1972:3) pointed out that "...Assam, peerless, may be a sanskritization of some earlier formation like Acham. In Tai (Ahom), Cham means to be defeated, and with the prefix 'A', the formation 'Assam' would mean undefeated. The word 'Asama', first given by the Shans (Ahoms), was later on applied to the country".

S.N. Sarma (1966) while dealing with Neo-Vaisnavism mentioned about acceptance and rejection of various forms of Hinduism among the Ahom monarchs.

A. Barua's (1989) article on 'Religious Outlook of the Ahoms' presented an idea about their selective adherence to a particular subset of the Hinduism.

In the case of the Ahoms acculturation was very important factor. As they came in contact with numerous cultures, both while they were nomadic and also when they settled down. Such contacts undoubtedly made serious impact on their way of life, some of which they resisted and some were incorporated in their style of life.

This book tries to critically examine almost all the major aspects of the Ahom culture, on the basis of the empirical data supplemented by secondary sources of information. Providing a historical perspective, it analyses the process of change which the Ahoms had to undergo to become what they are today. It also makes an in-depth study of their social organisation, with special emphasis on their commensal relations, beliefs and practices, rites and rituals, kinship and community life. The book will be of great interest to the scholars and students of culture studies.

Dr. Nitul Kumar Gogoi (b. 1964) received his M.Sc (1987), M. Phil. (1989) and Ph.D. (1996) degrees from North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. He is at present Reader in the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh.

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Cable: CONPUBCO Email: publishing@conceptpub.com

Showroom: Building No. 4788-90, Street No. 23,
Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110 002
Ph. 23272187

ISBN 81-8069-281-7



9 788180 692819

Rs. 250