

**DOCUMENTS ON
AHOM MOVEMENT
IN ASSAM**

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Editor

**Institute of Tai Studies & Research
Moranhat, Assam**

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Introduction

Dynamics of Ahom Movement

Girin Phukon

The 'Ahom' an offshoot of the Shan branch of Southeast Asia entered the plains of Assam in the early part of the thirteenth century and established their kingdom comprising, in the course of time, the whole of Assam valley and ruled for a long period of six hundred years. Eventually, they acquired the local name, 'Ahom' from which in the course of time, the Brahmaputta valley came to be known as 'Assam'.¹ More importantly, in due course, the Ahom had even identified themselves with the Assamese as they made significant contribution in the consolidation of composite Assamese society and were virtually absorbed into the Hindu social structure despite having their own language, religion and customs. In fact, they were free from religious inhibition and caste prejudices. In the pre-British period, not only did most of the dominant elite of the Assamese society come from the Ahoms, they had also made a deep and indelible impress on the Assamese society. But it appears rather strange that after the advent of the British the emerging educated elite of the Ahom started asserting their distinct identity within the larger Assamese society.

It needs to mention that during the British rule, the Ahom became backward educationally, socially, economically and even politically. In fact, they failed to occupy prominent place in British administration; important positions were held either by the Bengalis or the Assamese upper caste elite. The British did not recruit them, as being a ruling race they were not taken into confidence. As such, under the British rule, the Ahoms found that leadership in all spheres were slipping out of their hands and they were reduced to play second fiddle to the caste Hindus. Indeed, from a position of dominance, they sank to the rank of a 'Backward Class' eligible for favour and largesse granted by the British government. In order to remove their backwardness the Ahom began to organise and articulate. In the

pre-independence period they wanted adequate constitutional protection to safeguard their distinct socio-cultural identity. Even after decades of independence, the Ahom continue to insist on retaining their cultural identity and put an end to what they call, 'cultural and political domination' of the upper caste elite. They have been fighting relentlessly through various organizations such as *Ahom Sabha* (1893); *All Assam Ahom Association* (1910), *All Assam Ahom Students' Federation* (1944); *the Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam* (1955); *All Assam Mohan Deodhai Bailung Sanmillan* (1962); *All Assam Tai Students' Association* (1964); *Ahom Tai Mongoliya Rajya Parishad* (1967); *Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha* (1981); *Tai-Ahom Council* (2005) and so on for establishing their community into a rightful place. In effect, the Ahom continue to be a political force in Assam even to-day in terms of numerical strength and organizational capacity acquiring considerable influence over contemporary political scenario of the state. Therefore the movement of the Ahom deserves attention of the scholarly community.

II

In order to have a better understanding of the 'Ahom factor' in post-independence Assam politics, it is desirable to know the dynamics of Ahom movement. The Ahom became articulate when under the leadership of Padmanath Gohainbaruah, an eminent Assamese litterateur constituted the Ahom Sabha on 13 May, 1893 which was subsequently renamed as All Assam Ahom Association (AAAA) in 1910. At the initial stage, the AAAA leadership pleaded for conceding the demand such as free studentship, appointment in government services, reservation of seats in local bodies and provincial legislature. Considering the backwardness of the Ahom, provisions were made in the Act of 1909 and 1919 to recognise them as a Minority Community which was however abolished in the subsequent Act of 1935. Therefore, during the thirties and forties the frontline leadership of the organization was vigorously pursuing the cause of minority status and separate electorate for the Ahom. In the forties of the last century, with the growing process of democratisation of provincial administration and progressive extension

of representative government in the province, the Ahom elite realised that the socio-economic development of the Ahom was largely dependent of the extent of share in the administration they could enjoy. Indeed, they apprehended that their interest would not be protected in an upper caste dominated Assamese society. Therefore, to accelerate their pace of socio-economic development, the Ahom elite felt the need of adequate share of political power. As the development, in their opinion, was linked with the sharing of power they strongly desired to have their adequate representation in the provincial legislature and for which it was necessary to recognise the Ahom as 'Minority Community'. For this reason, Surendra Nath Buragohain, a representative of AAAA unsuccessfully moved a private Member's resolution in the Assam Legislative Assembly on November 20, 1943 thus :

This Assembly is of opinion that the Ahom community of this Province be included among the recognised minorities for 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 a minority.²

It appears that since the twenties the AAAA made a vigorous attempt to realise 'minority status' for the Ahom to safeguard their socio-economic interests. While failing to materialise this demand, they devised an alternative plan as a measure of maintaining distinct Ahom identity. Thus on the eve of independence, and in the event of division of India and Pakistan the AAAA pleaded for a 'sovereign independent status' for Assam. The Ahom elite thought that in a 'sovereign' Assam the Ahom would be in a better position to remove their backwardness. As such in its Executive Committee meeting held at Sibsagar on September 29, 1944 the AAAA 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 populations 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.

Zinnah should leave the question of Assam without Sylhet to the people of the soil to settle.³

The Ahom leaders had mobilized other Mongoloid communities in support of this demand which culminated in the formation of 'All Assam Tribes and Races Federation' in October, 1944.⁴ The organization also resolved the similar proposal mooted by the AAAA.

III

At any rate, it appears that during pre-independent period, particularly in the thirties and forties the AAAA had been playing a formidable role in Assam politics. It challenged the hegemonic position of the 'caste Hindu dominated' Congress party of the province. In the event of independence, when the constitution was being framed, the Ahom leaders collaborating with other ethnic elite pleaded for adequate constitutional safeguards to preserve and protect their distinct ethnic identities. For this purpose, they wanted their 'real representatives' in the Constituent Assembly elected by themselves.⁵ Indeed, under the leadership of the Ahom the leaders of ethnic communities of Assam emphatically demanded that :

These communities must be assured separate political existence in the new constitution by providing for them in the case of the Hill tribes, local autonomy and in the case of others, separate electorate. They must be allowed to live their own life with their own customs and culture without any encroachment either by the Hindus or by the Muslims.⁶

While demanding these special privileges for them in the new constitution, they asserted that the setting up of autonomous unit among the ethnic tribes was 'vital to the peace and tranquility' of this region. They warned the Congress leaders that a denial of their just right might bring 'chaos and insecurity' to this 'most vulnerable frontier of India'⁷ The effort made by the leaders of the Mongoloid communities to send their representatives to the Constituent Assembly became futile and their hopes and aspiration appeared to be shattered. Thus after independence, in the changed political circumstances, the AAAA felt the need of a broad based and coherent political organization to fight against the Congress in Assam. For this purpose, Surendranath Buragohain, an Ahom leader in collaboration with

Muhammad Saadullah, the Muslim League leader, P.M. Sarwan, the leader of the Assam Tea Labourers Association, Captain Williamson Sangma and Professor G. S. Swell, leaders of the hill tribes and a few others formed a new political party named: All Peoples' Party (Sarba-Dal) in 1948 in order to challenge the Congress in the First General Election of 1952.⁸ Although initially it had the potentialities of a strong political force, the Congress, allegedly manoeuvred defections in the Party.⁹ Thus the Congress succeeded in luring its key leaders Buragohain and Saadullah to defect and join the Congress in 1949, and the party lost its effectiveness. This action on the part of Buragohain had been characterised by a section of Ahom leaders as a betrayal of the cause of the Ahom. He however, defended his position arguing that the interest of the community could be better served by being with the ruling party i.e. Congress. Though till the late forties the AAAA played a meaningful opposition party in the province, it realised that benefits for the community could be achieved only by being with the ruling party. Thus the AAAA entered into an election alliance with the Congress just before the First general Election of Independent India on the condition that (i) adequate measures for protection of ancient monument, preservation of Tai manuscript and introduction of Tai language to be initiated; (ii) considerable number of parliamentary and Assembly seats to be reserved for the Ahoms.¹⁰ But subsequently; it appeared to a section of AAAA leaders that there was a half hearted attempt on the part of the 'caste Hindu dominated Congress' leadership to fulfil the conditions of the AAAA. In fact, the electoral alliance of the AAAA with the Congress made the former weak leading to division among its leaders. Taking advantage of the situation the Congress succeeded in luring away the stalwarts of AAAA to its fold and cornered the radical Ahom elements. Thus the Ahom became politically weak and lost their organizational strength to bargain with the ruling elite of the State for adequate share of political power.

In order to cope with this new situation, a number of Ahom organizations began to form since the middle of fifties. The most articulate section of the Ahoms deeply felt the need of the growth and development of their language and culture for asserting distinct

Ahom identity. They thought that maintenance of distinct identity became important to realise benefits for the community. It is the distinctness, they believed, which would enable them to consolidate the Ahoms. Therefore, as a measure of maintaining distinct identity they started emphasizing more on socio-cultural and linguistic demands in order to generate a sense of identity among the Ahoms. In view of this, the Ahom intellectuals constituted an academic forum under the name and style: *Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam* (THCSA) in 1955. In a bid to generate consciousness of their history and culture, the THCSA organized seminars, symposia, and talks on Tai Ahom and Tai culture.¹¹ The society had been publishing two research Journals- ‘Lik Phan Tai’ and ‘Tai Sanskriti’ in English and Assamese respectively to promote researches on Tai Language and Culture. Indeed, it wanted to consolidate the basic foundation of Ahom identity. It is interesting to note that in the late seventies before formation of ULFA, the THCSA organized a series of talks on the ‘Treaty of Yandabu, 1826’ at different parts of Assam. The main substance of the talks was that Assam was never conquered by the British, but she was wrongly tagged by the Britishers with the rest of India under the pretext of the Treaty.

In any case, since the early sixties the Ahoms became much concerned with their lingo-cultural identity. The Mohan, Deodhai and Bailung, the priestly class of the Ahom who mostly remained outside the purview of Hinduism, continued to make use of Tai Language in their religious and cultural ceremonies. As is well-known, Language is a cementing force of a particular group of people. Naturally, therefore, the Ahom elite desired to preserve and develop the Tai language in order to generate a sense of identity among the Ahoms. Therefore, the *All Assam Mohan Deodhai Bailung Sammilan* (AAMDBS) established in 1962 strongly pleaded for adequate facility for the development of Tai language and culture. In a similar vein, the ‘*All Assam Tai Students’ Association* formed in 1964, in one of its memoranda addressed to the then Chief Minister of Assam emphasised on the importance of learning Tai Language and asserted that :

It is of utmost importance to promote the study of Tai Language and literature in this part of the country by reason

of the fact that Tai is not only a mother tongue of a large section of the Tai population whose children are taught this language in their monastery schools, but also that there are lots of important and valuable manuscripts in Tai language in possession of the Tai Pundits of Assam, of many Assamese families and also in the Buddhist monasteries in upper Assam and NEFA dealing with history, religion jurisprudence natural science, astrology and many other subjects.¹²

In the subsequent period the demand for introduction of Tai Language appeared to be most popular among the Ahoms. Indeed, this demand found an important place in all the charter of demands prepared by different Ahom organizations and it became more forceful when the *Ban Ok Pup Lik Mioung Tai* (Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha) was established in 1981. In response to this demand, the Dibrugarh University introduced a Diploma Course of the Tai Language in 1984. Of late, it has been introduced at the primary schools of Tai Ahom inhabited areas of Assam. Along with the endeavour made for the development of Tai Language, there has been persistent efforts of different Ahom organizations for conservation of ancient monuments built during the rule of the Ahoms. It appears to them that the monuments bear the testimony to the glorious past of the Ahom, the preservation of which would obviously generate a feeling of distinct identity of the community.

Another significant move for maintaining distinct identity made by a section of the Ahoms is the revitalisation of their religious tradition. The Ahom elite realised that revitalisation of their religious tradition can play far greater role than that of language in order to consolidate the community. It may be reiterated that as the Ahoms have already adopted Assamese as their mother tongue, a section of the Ahoms therefore thought that linguistic appeal as a measure of maintaining Ahom identity may not be much effective. Further, although a large chunk of Ahoms have adopted Hinduism in addition to their traditional religion, they gradually started realising that it has been causing an obliteration of ethnic identity.¹³ More importantly, it appears to them that the upper caste Hindu look upon them down as a new entrant to the Hindu fold. Besides, as their traditional religion has been marked by absence of untouchability and caste-hierarchy,

the Ahom find it difficult to accommodate to the caste ridden Hindu social structure.¹⁴ In view of this, they felt the necessity of popularising their religious rites and customs which the priestly class jealously guarded. In a bid to bring back the Tai Ahom to its own religious cult a section of the Ahoms constituted a religious forum named the *Buddhist Society of Phralong Culture* (BSPC) in 1963. In the subsequent period however, the BSPC was converted into another religious organization: *All Assam Phralung Sangha* (AAPS) in 1975 with similar objectives. Now it is increasingly felt necessary to popularise the religious traits by performing their traditional rites like Om-pha, Sai-pha and Me- Dum Me Phi in an increasing scale.¹⁵ Thus the Ahom elite seek to generate a religious sentiment for the purpose of uniting the community.

In the wake of revivalism of tradition and culture, All Assam Tai Students' Association (AATSA) successfully mobilized the Ahom students in favour of various demands of the community particularly, during the period of late sixties and early seventies. It worked very closely with the Ahom Tai Mongoliya Parishad, a political platform of the Ahoms. It is significant to note that the AATSA vehemently opposed the medium movement in 1972 and introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction in the educational institutions of Assam. As a matter of fact, it played a key role in mobilizing public opinion in favour of English which greatly helped the Guwahati and Dibrugarh Universities to take a decision retaining English as an alternative medium of instruction. The AATSA, however gradually became inactive with the emergence of Hiteswar Saikia, an Ahom elite as an important figure in Congress politics of Assam. He could successfully neutralize the Ahom force in Assam politics in his favour. In the late eighties when the AGP government miserably failed to take any positive steps towards the fulfilment of long-standing demands of the Ahoms, and all other ethnic students organizations became active, the Ahom students decided to revive the AATSA and renamed it as *All Tai-Ahom Students' Union* (ATASU) in 1988. Although the ATASU declare itself as a socio-cultural organization, it appears to be very much vocal in political issues.

IV

The Ahoms have not only been mobilized on the basis of lingo-cultural traits but also on the ground of economic backwardness. They have been recognized as one of the 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC) due to their socio-economic backwardness. The Ahom elite increasingly feel that the privileges received under backward class status is not adequate to remove their economic backwardness. Therefore, a section of the Ahoms has been pleading for recognising the community as 'Scheduled Tribe'¹⁶ which will enable them to enjoy the privilege of reservation of seats in the legislature and to compete with the advanced section of the population of the state. Thus demanding tribal identity the Tai Ahom Council of Assam in one of its memoranda addressed to the President of India maintained:

We fully claim to our tribal identity and have the reasons to believe that a constitutional safeguard shall alone be the only means and the most imperative need of the hour for a total upliftment of the Tai-Ahom Tribe in social, educational and political spheres by including the Ahoms in the Schedule of Scheduled Tribes of India under Articles 342 of the Constitution of India, as has been done in case of other Mongoloid Tribes of Assam and elsewhere.¹⁷

It may be noted that the Ahoms viewed with concern the anti-reservation stir which rocked the entire nation. The articulate section of the Ahoms has taken an active interest to bring all the like-minded communities under one political platform to stand unitedly against the anti-reservation force which culminated in the formation of Reservation Protection Council Assam (RPCA) in 1990.

It may be reiterated that in the late sixties when a proposal for reorganization of Assam was mooted, the socio-cultural organization concerned with ameliorating the social, historical and cultural aspect of the Tai Mongoloid people, had changed their ideology and keeping in view the prevailing political situation, the Ahom leaders realised the need of a common political platform. Thus different Ahom organizations having similar objectives merged into one and subsequently it was christened as *Ahom Tai Mongoliya Rajya Prishad* (ATMRP) in 1967 in order to demand a separate state constituting undivided Sibsagar and Lakshimpur districts.¹⁸ In view

of ATMRP's decision to contest the mid-term Parliamentary Election to the Lok Sabha in 1971 to back up the demand for a separate state, the organization was rechristened as *Ujani Asom Rajya Parishad* (UARP) in 1970 in order to give it a secular colour. This was done as a part of election strategy to enlist the support of the non-Ahoms so that a wider political platform for their movement may be established. However, it failed to achieve its objective through election because of the wrong moves taken by the party leadership and became virtually extinct after its election alliance with the Janata party in 1977.

In the early eighties the political scenerio of the state changed considerably. Mr. Hiteswar Saikia, an Ahom elite emerged as the unquestionable leader of the Congress. This had given a sense of satisfaction to the Ahoms and their assertion that they are being deprived of 'legitimate share' of political power became blunt. Mr. Saikia a shrewd politician successfully manoeuvred to bring the leaders of the Ahom organizations to the Congress fold or managed to offer them lucrative assignment. As a first step in this direction, Siba Buragohain, general secretary of the UARP was offered a Congress Party ticket in the election of 1983 and he became the member of the Legislative Assembly. Similarly, Professor K N. Saikia, President of the UARP became the *justice* of Guwahati High Court. In the subsequent period, most of the UARP leaders formally joined the Congress. However, during the rule of Asom Gana Parishad (1985-90) most of the Ahom organizations became active and the Ahoms were mobilized on the plea that they were deprived of their 'legitimate' share of administration of the state under the caste-Hindu led AGP government. The same feelings and sentiments still continue among the articulate section of the Ahoms. In recent times, although different Ahom organizations are not contesting in the elections, the organizations like *Tai Ahom Council*, Ahom Jatiya Sanmilan, All Assam Tai Ahom Samaj, All Tai-Ahom students' Union and newly revitalised Ahom Sabha have been demanding inclusion of the Tai Ahoms in the schedule of Scheduled Tribes and reservation of Assembly and Parliamentary Seats for the Ahoms on the basis of their numerical strength. In the nineties of last century, however, the

co-ordination committee of different organizations of the Ahoms had been pleading for establishment of an Autonomous State comprising the districts of Upper Assam. The Ahom leaders believed that in an Autonomous State of Upper Assam, the Ahoms would be in the helm of affairs of the proposed new state which will enable them to safeguard their interest. On the occasion of the 770th years of the advent of Siu-Ka- Pha, the first king of the Ahoms to this land, the years 1997-98 was celebrated as 'Chao-Lung Siu-Ka_Pha year' with a year-long programme which generated a considerable sense of 'Ahom identity'.

V

The above discussion reveals that : the assertion of the Ahoms for a distinct identity is more than a century old. Initially, they pleaded for free Studentship, reservation of government jobs and seats in the local bodies and provincial legislature in order to ensure socio-economic upliftment of the community. With the growing process of democratisation of the British administration, the Ahom elite aspired for adequate share in the decision making process of the province. Indeed, they realised that development of the Ahoms was largely dependent on the extent of share of political power they could enjoy. For this reason they persistently pleaded for 'minority status' and 'separate electorate' for the Ahoms so that they may have an 'adequate' number of representatives in the provincial legislature. After independence, Ahom elite have become more concerned with the demands such as introduction of Tai Language, preservation and protection of historical monuments, Scheduled Tribes status and even creation of an autonomous state comprising the upper Assam districts. When these demands were not conceded to them, they increasingly felt the necessity of organising themselves capable of bargaining with the ruling elite to realise benefits for the community. It may be noted that mobilization of the Ahoms depends upon the extent of consciousness on the basis of distinct lingo-cultural traits. Therefore, it became imperative on the part of the Ahoms to demand for conservation and development of their language and culture as a measure of maintaining distinct Ahom identity. It appears to them

that unless they maintain distinct Ahom identity, it is not possible to mobilize the community on a sound footing which is necessary to acquire bargaining capacity to bargain with the ruling elite for the development of the Ahom. Thus the *maintenance of distinct identity and deveoement of the community* appears to be identical and complementary to each other. In fact, ‘politics of Ahom identity’ has been a living phenomenon in Assam since the days of pre-independence. As such emerging Ahom elite consciously or unconsciously involve in the process of politics of identity. It may, therefore, be observed that the ‘politics of Ahom identity’ is not only the result of their traditional traits but it results in as a ‘defence mechanism’ against the domination by the relatively advanced section of the Assamese society. On the whole, bargaining for a ‘Legitimate’ share of political power began to be viewed by the Ahoms as one of the means of solution of their problems. Nevertheless, it appears that most of the Ahom leaders lack political maturity and want to achieve personal gain at the cost of the community. They use the sentiment of the community as a vehicle to fulfil their individual interest. More importantly, they seem to be inclined towards the ruling party in order to realise personal benefits rather than being guided by a principle or ideology; Thus their opportunistic mentality at times stand in the way of serving their community as a whole.

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2. *Assam Legislativte Assembly* (Report of the working of the Assam Legislatie Assembly (1937-45), Shillong 1946, p. 87.
3. Proceeding of the Executive Committee meeting of the AAAA held at Sibsagar on September 29, 1944. Also reported in ‘*The Assam Tribune*’, October 6, 1944.
4. The Ahoms, the Chutias, the Kacharis, the Miris, the Deoris, the Khasis, the Garos, the Nagas, the Lushais and the Mikirs joined the Federation and in its First Conference held at Shillong on March 21-23, 1945, a similar resolution demanding sovereign status for Assam was adopted. See, A C. Bhuyan & S. Dev (eds.); *Political History of Assam* Vol III, Guwahati, 1980, p. 283. Also see, Padmeswar Gogoi : *Future Status of Assam* Jorhat, 1945.

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