

# Emergence of the Ahom Monarchy in Upper Assam (13th–15th Century)

*Tejimala Gurung*

The period, 13–15th century in north-east India witnessed the development of a large number of polity formations emerging from a predominantly tribal social base.<sup>1</sup> The various tribes like the Chutiya, the Tai-Ahom, the Dimasa, the Meitei, the Khasi, the Jaintia, the Tripuri, and the Koch crystallised into rudimentary state formations during the period.<sup>2</sup> When, why and how these political formations founded upon territory and property emerged or in other words the socio-economic factors associated with it constitute pertinent aspects of enquiry.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Physical and Historical Setting**

The Ahoms, a segment of the Mao-Shan sub-tribe of the Tais of south-east Asia migrated from upper Burma to the eastern extremity of the Brahmaputra valley during the thirteenth century.

The Brahmaputra valley constitutes one of the three main physiographic divisions of Assam, the other being the Barak plain and the hills region. One of the three great Indian riverine plains, the Brahmaputra plain is an extensive riverine alluvial plain about four hundred and fifty miles in length from east to west and with an average breadth of about fifty miles from north to south. Hemmed in on the north, east and west by lofty mountains and

sub-Himalayan ranges the valley is ideally suited for rice cultivation. Located on one of the important migration routes the region had witnessed the migration of various racial groups such as the Australoids, the Caucasoids and the Mongoloids, the last being the most numerous group. During the ancient period the lower Brahmaputra valley was the seat of the Kamrupa kingdom which had its capital at Durjayya (Guwahati) and at Hattapesvara (Tezpur) at different times. At the height of its political power the Kamrupa kingdom extended to the river Karatoya on the west. Hiuentasang the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, who visited Kamrupa during the seventh century described the eastward expansion of the kingdom up to the far east as does the modern state of Assam. However, the effective control of Kamrupa never extended beyond central Assam.

By the thirteenth century no semblance of a central kingship that Kamrupa had was left. In its place a fragmented political structure of numerous polities — tribal and non-tribal was evident. The area between the Barnadi in the east and Karatoya was under the Kamata dynasty, with its Tibeto-Burman Khen kings whose last representative Nilambar Shah was overthrown by Hussain Shah in 1498.<sup>4</sup> The Kamrupa political tradition however persisted in the fragmented political structure of petty chiefdoms (*bhuyan-raj*) in western and central Assam.<sup>5</sup> Coexisting with it in the east and south east were several tribal polities then undergoing a process of socio-political transformation. In Upper Assam, the Chutiya polity was centred on the north bank of the Brahmaputra bounded by the Buri Dihing in the south and extended from the Burai river in the west to Sadiya in the east. The Kachari polity was located on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. Upper Assam was inhabited predominantly by the Moran, Borahi, Kachari and Chutiya tribes. By and large shifting cultivation was the dominant agricultural practice. Some tribes had, however, moved from shifting to settled cultivation with or without the use of plough.

It was under such geographical and historical environment that the Ahoms started building a state system of their own. The Ahoms were a wet rice cultivating group with a patriarchal social organisation ruled by dominant chiefs. Their polity in Burma was known as *Mong*. The Ahoms initially established themselves in the Dikhou valley. Over the subsequent centuries the petty *bhuyan raj* and the smaller tribes that existed were absorbed into the Ahom

polity. The earliest and most powerful of the tribal state that of the Chutiya was annexed in 1523. The Koch state founded in 1575 was divided into two states — Koch Behar in Bengal and Koch Hajo in Assam in 1581. The latter was absorbed into the Ahom state by the seventeenth century. The Kachari state too was reduced to vassalage by the mid-sixteenth century. The only other independent monarchies during the same period were those of Manipur, Tripura and Jaintia. By the mid-seventeenth century the Ahom monarchy had emerged as the dominant power in the Brahmaputra Valley. It was however, not until the sixteenth and seventeenth century (period beyond the purview of this paper) with the sizeable extension of Ahom territory southward and westward towards central and lower Assam, and exposure to erstwhile Kamarupa political tradition, contemporary Turko-Afghan and subsequent Mughal influence alongside the Hinduisation process, that the Ahom state and monarchy attained maturity and elaboration.

The paper seeks to examine the socio-economic issues associated with the emergence of the Ahom monarchy during the early period of its state formation. It is evident that the scope of the work is limited by the period covered (13–15th century). During this period the early Ahom State was still in the process of rudimentary formation. The Ahom king (*Chaopa*) was basically a military chief with a rudimentary polity. The *Buranjis* or Assamese chronicles form the basic source material. Insights derived from anthropological studies of non-state societies has been used. A comparative study of pre-colonial institutions amongst other Shan and Tai peoples of Burma and south-east Asia cannot be ignored. Nineteenth century eyewitness account of the Tai-Khamtis (cognates of the Tai-Ahoms) have also been used wherever found useful and relevant.

### **Expansion and Absorption**

As stated above the Ahoms migrated to the Upper Brahmaputra Valley, from Burma where they formed a group of states (known as Nara to the Assamese). Under Sukapha their chief, a small hardy group of armed Ahoms moved about in the south eastern corner of the Brahmaputra Valley looking for a suitable site for permanent settlement. In the process they left behind small colonies at strategic

places like Khamjang, Tipam and Namrup to 'watch the fields'. The subjugated Moran and Borahi tribes were brought within the Ahom tribal system as fuel gatherers, suppliers of forest products and to serve as cooks. In 1263 the main body of Ahoms finally settled in the fertile Dikhou valley. Here at a place called Songtok, Sukapha declared himself as king of the domain (*Mong*). Sukapha sent his ambassador to the Nara king Sukrangpha's court, seeking political recognition as a subsidiary lord which was granted. The passage to lordship was symbolised by performing bloody sacrifices and making ritualistic offerings of gold and silver to the mountain god.<sup>6</sup> The relation between lord and overlord was maintained for some time. As was the practice in his country, Sukapha appointed two counsellors *Chao Frongmung* and *Chao Thamung* to assist him in administration. Under Sutinpha (1268–1281), Sukapha's son, the Ahoms were successful in extending their sway over the country east of the Dikhou river. The Cacharis who were inhabiting the territory, and were fairly numerous in number — the *Satsari Buranji* refers to a strength of 4000 men, did not give any serious opposition to the new group. Instead they left and settled in Saring.<sup>7</sup> In all probability the Cacharis being predominantly shifting cultivators were not fiercely attached to their rice fields.

To streamline the control over labour, Subinpha (1281–93) distributed the Ahom subjects amongst the two counsellors. The king ordered that they should work for him for a certain number of days. By the fourteenth century the Ahoms had greatly increased numerically not only by natural growth but by assimilation of the local tribes such as the Morans, Borahis, Chutiyas and Cacharis. When the Ahoms migrated to Assam, they had left behind their womenfolk.<sup>8</sup> They therefore, took in marriage women of other tribes subjugated by them. Such inter marriages contributed significantly to the assimilation process, thereby strengthening the control of the Ahom chief. Sukapha started the practice of marrying the daughters of leading tribal chiefs. In the Shan scheme of things, a woman was considered an appropriate subject of tribute from an inferior to a superior.<sup>9</sup> Polygyny practised by a Shan ruler was an important part of the political system in that it gave the king personal ties with a large number of different groups both within and outside the court.<sup>10</sup> Challenges to the developing Ahom polity as indicated by the revolt of the Tipam, Khamjang and Aiton tribes

were put down by Sudangpha (1397–1407) also known as Bamuni Konwar. Under him, the boundary between the Ahom and Nara (Moguang) territories along the Patkai range was delimited by a formal treaty in 1402. His reign marked the beginning of Brahmanical influence in Ahom polity.<sup>11</sup> The Brahmin who had sheltered Sudangpha during his childhood was made his advisor while the sons of the Brahmins were given posts of importance on the frontier. A consolidation of political authority followed. However till the close of 15th century no appreciable territorial expansion of the Ahom Kingdom was evident. The early Ahom state during the 13–15th century continued to be based on a small territory on the south bank of the eastern extremity in the Brahmaputra Valley. It extended from the Patkai hills in the east to the river Dikhou on the west. This obviously set the limit for any significant process of state formation. As long as the political authority constituting of the king, his close advisors and select members of leading family lineages of specific clans, was confined to a small territory, with a scanty population, limited surplus, lacking a diversified economy and exposure to the Hinduisation process, the Ahom polity could not develop towards greater elaboration and sophistication. It was not until the sixteenth and seventeenth century with the spatial extension, by way of conquests, to newer territories with a diversified population and economy, incorporation of larger non-Ahom population alongside the Hinduisation process that the development and consolidation of the Ahom state and monarchy took place. Within this context the framework of the process of political emergence of the Tai Ahom monarchy and its institutions of administration in the initial phase, were provided by their Tai-Shan heritage and material culture of wet rice cultivation.

### **The Tai-Shan Heritage**

The emergence of early Ahom monarchy was conditioned by its Tai heritage. In the initial period, this was of primary importance and influence in shaping the process of Ahom polity formation in Upper Assam prior to its exposure to pan Indian tradition and its influences.

When the Ahoms migrated to upper Brahmaputra valley, they already had an experience of a political society (*Mong*) in Moguang

(Mong Kawng) in the upper Burma-Yunnan region. The Shan polity was associated with wet rice cultivation, a patriarchal social organisation oriented towards dominant clan chiefs. Remarking about the Shans in Burma, Leach had observed.

*“The Shans considering their wide dispersal and their scattered form of settlement are astonishingly uniform. This unity of Shan culture is correlated with a uniformity of Shan political organisation which is in turn largely determined by the special economic facts of the Shan situation.”*<sup>12</sup>

The Shans in upper Burma were organised politically into states (*Mong*) having its own chief (*Saopha*). A *Mung* contained a number of villages under one chief. A larger *Mung* would contain a federation of such units. A Shan *Mung* settlement tended to be closely settled and the villagers closely tied to their lands.

The Ahoms, carried with them the experiences and traditions of this polity. When they migrated they were already a stratified group with a capacity for surplus production due to their knowledge of wet rice cultivation. Sukapha their chief was chosen because he belonged to the royal clan from which alone a Shan chief could be chosen. The two counsellors chosen to assist him belonged to the next two customarily important clans. They were designated as *Chao Thomung* (Bar Gohain) and *Chao Frongmung* (Bura Gohain). The right to rule and administer was based on the right of joint conquest and accordingly political authority was vested in Sukapha and his commanders and their descendants. Along with four other, the Dihingiya, Sandiqui, Lahan and Duara the *Satgharia* lineages constituted the Ahom nobility.<sup>13</sup> These formed the embryonic aristocracy and the core groups of the Tai-Ahom nobility.

There are several instances given in the Buranjis of the ‘great nobles’ ruling without a king since none was found worthy. When Sutinpha, the Ahom king was murdered by the Chutiya ruler in 1376, the country was ruled for four years by the ‘great nobles’ since no prince was found worthy. After the assassination of Tyakhamti in 1389 the great nobles ruled for eight years.<sup>14</sup> These instances would suggest that kingship as an institution had not yet stabilised. The elective element still prevailed, though an Ahom king had to come from specific royal lineages. Describing the Ahom polity at the early stage, Amalendu Guha had stated:

*“Thus partly hereditary and partly elective the king and his two chief counsellors together constituted the highest executive, and they were supposed to hold each other in check and balance. Together they met, from time to time, in the audience chamber of the chiefs pile house in the community assembly hall (hawlong) attached to it. Thus they managed a rude type of military democracy, in which the elders of other respectable and free commoners lineages had also a voice. This simple constitution continued to be in existence until the end of the 14th century. The chief counsellors elected a new king, and they themselves were in turn confirmed or newly nominated by the latter. Property in agricultural and wastelands belonged to the community.”<sup>15</sup>*

The legitimation of the early Ahom monarchy was provided by their origin myths and traditions. Such legitimizing concepts of the earlier periods formed the foundation for legitimacy in the newly developing state. Early Tai-Ahom myths and traditions describe how the polity originated, the rationale behind its emergence and the superior claims and duty of Tai chiefs to rule and successfully extend wet rice cultivation. The theory of the Divine Origin of the State and of the Divine Right of Kings are perhaps the oldest theories of the origin of the state and of the right of kings to rule. According to Ahom origin myths the Ahom rulers were directly descended from two divine ancestors, Khunlung and Khunlai who were sent down to earth to rule with a firm hand.<sup>16</sup> The Tai-Ahom myths and traditions explained the polity as divinely ordained for reconciling social contradictions. The Lord of Heaven was said to have told the founding fathers on the eve of their descent to the earth as follows:

*“The country is full of Tais and slaves. They cannot distinguish right from wrong. They are in the habit of taking others property and wives by force.”<sup>17</sup>*

The Tai myths and traditions therefore, hint of a developed state of society which witnessed the emergence of family, property and social groups. The polity and kingship was thus instituted to reconcile social contradictions in society. Kingship as an institution came to be legitimized through genealogy and traditions so that none but an Ahom belonging to the royal lineage was eligible to become a ruler. From the very first ruler Sukapha this tradition

was followed. It came to be propagated that only certain families belonging to the royal lineage alone could provide princes eligible to become kings.

*“He whose fore fathers were never rulers can hardly be expected to be a king. He can never get homage from others.”<sup>18</sup>*

That the Ahom ruler had to come from a royal lineage became an established practice which strengthened the institution of kingship. Even when the great nobles chose a king the choice of ruler was limited to the members of the royal lineage. Through religious ceremonies and rituals the idea of the divinity of and the greatness of the Ahom ruler were propagated and the solidity of the idea was established with the sanction of the priests-Deodhais, Mohuns and Bailungs. Such concepts of sacral leadership are to be found in African chiefdoms and early states. Even at the early stage of Ahom polity formation in Upper Assam, the Ahoms were able to propagate the divinity of the rulers and conquer the minds of the subjugated tribes:

*“These people are not simply anybody.  
They are heavenly creatures. Their physical attributes say so.  
They have no parallel. They cannot be compared to others.”<sup>19</sup>*

Thus, the Borahis came to the above conclusion after an extended discussion and agreed to supply the Ahoms with firewood. The Ahom ideology of kingship served to justify the existing inequalities, power differentials, and the exaction of the tributes. As with kingship, numerous tasks of a ritual or administrative offices were open only to the specific Ahom lineages. Thus their concerted activities built, so to say, royalty and state.

### **Role of Wet Rice Cultivation**

The emergence of the Ahom monarchy was strengthened by positive developments in the economic aspect. The very essence of Shan culture being its association with wet rice cultivation the Ahom migration to the Brahmaputra valley had represented as improvement in the productive forces. In pre-Ahom upper Ahom, most of the rice cultivation was done by ploughless tribal cultivators. Short maturing dry (*ahu*) variety of rice, undulating

land surface, broadcasting of seeds, slash and burn, land rotation for fallowing and the use of the hoe or digging sticks — these were its dominant features.<sup>20</sup> The Ahoms who were a segment of the Tai-Shans living in Burma had a fairly uniform culture based on wet rice cultivation. Writing about the Shans in Burma during the 19th century Leach had observed,

*"All Shan settlements are associated with wet rice cultivation. Their settlements occur along the river valley in pockets of level country in the hills. Such settlements are always found associated with irrigated wet paddy land."*<sup>21</sup>

The Ahoms were a plough using wet rice cultivating tribe with the knowledge of higher agricultural technology. The use of the plough and transplantation techniques along with a system of controlling the water in the fields formed its features. Hence the migration of the Ahoms into the region meant the invasion of the plough into pockets of rice and stick culture and an extension of wet rice (*sali*) cultivation at the cost of that of dry rice (*ahu*) and also of the transplantation technique in preference to the broadcasting of seeds. In fact the Ahom militia can be called a group of cultivators looking for fresh lands which brought them into the fertile Brahmaputra valley. The valley being extremely conducive for rice cultivation, delighted the Ahoms who described it as '*Mung dun chung kham*' meaning the land full of golden crops or gardens of gold. Forests were cleared, land surfaces levelled and marshy lands reclaimed for cultivation. Labour was thus a crucial factor in wet rice cultivation. It also formed the basis for surplus extraction. The subjugated non-Ahoms were utilised to work in the royal *khats* or farms. The process began with the division of the population between the two counsellors, the Buragohain and the Bargohain who were henceforth obliged to supply to the king his requirements of men and materials for certain days. The Ahom militia at this stage was still a voluntary organ. They could not be coerced into doing the works assigned to them. This is evident from an episode cited in the *Satsari Buranji*.<sup>22</sup> The Bargohain of Subinpha who had been given an elephant, had to cut the elephant fodder himself since the Ahoms who were assigned to bring the fodder did the work only if they felt like, otherwise not. It is related in the *Buranji* that one stormy day after being hurt while cutting the grass the disgusted Bargohain went

to the king to tell him he did not want the elephant and the office. The next person who was given the elephant and made the Bargohain had no such problem since he had seven sons and seven daughters-in-law. This episode illustrates the non-coercive aspect of the early Ahom polity and the importance of familial labour. The success of the Ahoms in mobilising labour made it possible to extend wet rice cultivation in upper Assam. The successful and efficient mobilisation of labour as well as its control were crucial aspects in the growth and development of the economy. The subjugated tribal groups along with the Ahom militia were increasingly used for providing infrastructural facilities for extension of wet rice cultivation. The manpower pool was utilised for the tasks of land reclamation, construction and maintenance of an extensive embankment network for water control and distribution. All these facilitated the extension of wet rice cultivation. Under the Ahoms, diverse food gathering groups were subsequently brought into the fold of a single production process. The conquest of neighbouring tribes and enlistment of the conquered subjects as members of the Ahom militia fostered this process. The role of wet rice cultivation in the development of the Ahom state has been competently emphasised by Amalendu Guha.<sup>23</sup> Wet rice cultivation ensured increased production, made possible the generation of surplus enabling the sustenance of a larger population and development of the political structure. This subsequently led to the elaboration of a bureaucratic machinery for purposes of mobilisation and utilisation of manpower or militia. Extension of wet rice cultivation and its success were thus crucial for the development of the Ahom state and monarchy. In fact the successful role of the Ahom king in the organisation of agricultural production specially wet rice cultivation and its continuation stabilised and strengthened the institution of kingship. The success of wet rice cultivation provided greater political legitimacy to the Tai Ahom polity which during the period was one of the many communities vying for the dominant ruling position in the valley.

### **Summing Up**

The emergence of Ahom monarchy in upper Assam was a process brought about and resulting from an interaction of elements indigenous and exogenous. The material and political culture of

the Tai-Ahoms carried by them from upper Burma provided the exogenous element which at the early phase of state formation gave them a model on which to base their polity. From then on the process of Ahom monarchy formation grew and developed through constant adjustments to local conditions — material, political, spatial and the larger pan-Indian Brahmanical influences.

#### END NOTES

1. See Surajit Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Polities and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North-Eastern India*, K.P. Bagchi, Calcutta, 1987.
2. Amalendu Guha, "The Ahom Political System", in *ibid.*, p. 145.
3. F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and State*, Progress Publishers, Moscow; Henri, J.M. Claessen and Peter Skalnik (eds.), *The Early State*, Mouton, The Hague, 1978.
4. Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, L.B.S. Publications, Guwahati, Third Edition, (Reprint) 1984, pp. 25–26.
5. A. Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 152.
6. Sayeeda Yasmin Saikia (trns.), *Satsari Ahom Buranji Chronicle II: 117* in *In the Meadows of Gold*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1997, pp. 43–44.
7. *Satsari Ahom Buranji Chronicle I: 21*, *ibid.*, p. 8.
8. *Ibid.*, Chronicle I: 12; S.K. Bhuyan, "Introduction" in *Tungkhungia Buranji*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, Reprint, 1983, p. XVIII.
9. E.R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, Athlone Press, University of London, Reprint, 1970, p. 217.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
11. *Satsari Ahom Buranji Chronicle I: 32*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
12. E.R. Leach, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
13. S.K. Bhuyan, *Tungkhungia Buranji*, p. XVII.
14. Golap Chandra Barua (trns. and ed.), *Ahom Buranji*, Calcutta, 1930, p. 49.
15. Amalendu Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
16. Golap Chandra Barua, *op. cit.*, ff. 5–23.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
19. *Satsari Ahom Buranji Chronicle I: 17*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
20. Amalendu Guha, *op. cit.*, p. 213.
21. E.R. Leach, *op. cit.*, p. 213.
22. *Satsari Ahom Buranji Chronicle I: 23*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
23. Amalendu Guha, "Medieval Economy of Assam", Appendix in T. Roychaudhury and Irfan Habib (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. I, 1200 c–c 1750, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 478–505.