



# A Study on the Expansion of the Hinduism in Medieval Assam: A Special Reference to the Role of Ahom Kings towards Hinduism

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Assam came into contact with the vedic culture in pre-historical period. The Kings of Kamrupa used to establish Brahmin priests in different parts of the kingdom which led to rapid expansion of Vedic culture and conversion of the non-Aryan people to Hinduism. In that course, the Aryan Brahmins radically change their efforts to assimilate the non-Aryans. They adopted some new myths with a view to accept the new deities belonged to the local tribal people as new Hindu deity. In course of time *Saivism* and *Saktism* found dominant position in the religious culture of Assam. The Siva originally a tribal God, continued to receive homage from both the ruling families and the tribal communities. Likewise, the *Saktism* was also very dominant among the tribal people. With *Saktism*, *Tantrikism* also secured strong foothold in this land till the emergence of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement launched by Sankardeva in sixteenth century A.D.

The process of Hinduisation was there in the Brahmaputra valley since the days of Kamrupa ruler. It was conducted by large numbers of Brahmin priests coming from northern India and were well patronized by the rulers. They used to continue Sanskritisation process also which led to the development of the Assamese language from the egalitarian bases. But once the process received set back caused by the disappearance of the Kamrupa kingdom when there was no central power in the valley. After the downfall of the Kamrupa kingdom, the Bhuyans and the Chutias loosely continued the Sanskritisation and Aryanisation process. Nevertheless, the process was slow in upper Assam. When the Ahoms first landed there, the process of Ahomisation was emerging. But with the annexation and absorption of Chutia state and the petty Bhuyan chiefdoms at first and followed by the Koch kingdom later, the Ahomisation process had to give way to the Hinduisation process.

Thus, the Hindu influence gained momentum and accelerated only after the political consolidation of the Ahoms.

For the first two hundred years, the Ahoms continued to follow their traditional religion with sacrifices in their religious performances. Socio-political and linguistic exigencies actuated them gradually to lean towards Hinduism. This was not in a mass scale nor because of the Hindu religion as such, but in the wake of a plural society which was slowly emerging out of the Ahom conquest, expansion and absorption. Moreover, the gradual change towards Hinduism was more due to certain historical events rather than that of any religious zeal. King Sudangpha alias Bamuni Konwar (1398-1407) had open the door of the Ahom royal house to penetrate the Brahmanic cult of the Hinduism after almost two hundred years of the establishment of the kingdom. It was happened through an accident of history. He was born and brought up in a Brahmin family, a native of a locality named Habung and naturally he patronized that family as a sign of gratitude. The family was established at the capital city and provided accommodation to continue the religious activities. The king also participated actively in the Hindu rituals. The Brahmin priest used to regularly perform the worship to *Lakshmi narayan Salagram* image where the king also deeply participated following the habit of his early days. Bamuni konwar was the first Ahom king to have adopted the coronational rites the *Singarighar*. The system might have existed earlier among the local indigenous tribes but in a crude and primitive form. Later on, the Brahmanic influence added decency and decorum with elaborate rituals. This was made as the significant development in the projection of the heavenly image of the Ahom kingship so as to justify the despotic and absolute nature of the Ahom monarchy. Thus the Brahmanic influence led the Ahom sovereignty towards more sophistication.

The process of Hinduisation, onward this time, went on unabated. As the historical records say, the illustrious Ahom monarchs like Su-hung-mung alias Dihingia Raja (1497-1539), Susengpha alias Pratapsigha (1603-1639), Sutamla alias Jaydhajsingha (1648-1663) had increasingly patronized the Hinduism. During the reign of Rudrasingha (1696-1714) and Sivasinha the Ahom state was becoming a Hindu one.

Now we may analyze the important factors which had led this religious development in the Ahom state.

Firstly, the religio-cultural base of the Ahoms was predominantly egalitarian. The *Hinduisation* process helped this development from an egalitarian base to that of a monarchical base. Therefore, it is clear that the title of the Ahom king, the *Saopha* was replaced by the Aryan *Swargadeva* which had more connotation befitting the power and image of the rising Ahom sovereign. By such process, an image of violability of the Ahom king was created by giving him divine descent which was a necessary means at that time to enable the king to resort to more warfare and to extract more surplus to build up the newly grown state. It also helped in the integration of the indigenous clans and the bordering tribes along with the intellectuality advanced Hindu population to come under a common flag.

Secondly, the *Brahmanical* influence added substance to the Devine Right theory which brought necessary support to the monarchy without the use of force, threat or coercion. The adoption of *Brahmanical* religion helped the royal house to solve the question of legitimacy and the validity of the dynastic rule of the Ahom kings before the common subjects both Hindus and non-Hindus.

Thirdly, during the reign of Sudangpha alias Bamuni Konwar, the Ahoms had decided to make their home and to settle permanently in the land they had seized by sealing their relations with their original homeland by a clear cut demarcation of the boundary of the Ahom kingdom in the east. Therefore, they neither liquidated nor expelled the conquered population and by this time, they were sufficient in number to establish themselves as a cohesive and distinct ruling body apart from and above their subjects which gave birth to a 'conquest society' after more conquests and absorptions of numerous Hindu population. The 'conquest society' could no longer remain the same after the cultural and linguistic assimilations in the course of time. Thus it got transformed into a plural society where theocracy would be untenable. Since the Ahom rulers had nothing to do with religion, Hinduisation of the Ahoms in general, was the logical process towards sophistication of the rudimentary formation of the Ahom state. Therefore, the Ahom rulers patronized the Hindu religious preceptors not out of any serious zeal for religion as such, but more as a means to their legitimized consolidations. This is proved by the fact that the Ahom rulers entreated all the different religious sects equally such as the *Sakta*, *Vaishnava*, Brahmins even including the Muslim *pyrs*. Besides, they also continued to maintain the orthodox and traditional Ahom rituals and ceremonies. They did not make any one of these as the state religion, nor did they impose them on their subjects.

On these bases, the ahoms accepted the Hinduism as a deliberate policy appears to be untenable because of such religious thoughts of the Ahom rulers. In the government also, no Hindu was admitted to the top hierarchy of the nobility. Similarly, no Ahom could be or was admitted to the rank of atop Hindu religious order. Their position was low in rank and status in the Hindu social ladder and it was no less than the tribal status.

But there emerged some irreconcilable contradictions regarding the expansion of Hinduism. The Brahmanic cult was not only caste oriented but also class dominated. It was, in fact, prone to social inequalities and its unfounded liberal patronization by the despotic Ahom rulers added new dimensions in the socio-political spheres. The *neo-vaishnavite* religion launched by Sankardeva (1449-1568) was the product of the social circumstances of the time. In challenging the Brahmanical supremacy, Sankardeva adopted the most simple but a more ingenuous means. It was the *Bhakti* cult. Because *Bhakti* was a casteless theme. It attracted the general population against the caste dominated Brahmanic Hindu culture and civilization. Moreover, this *neo-vaishnavite* movement contained some democratic elements as against the authoritarian despotic rule. The movement, thus could draw a large number of follower since all men were equal in the eyes of God. Therefore, the movement became very popular amongst the divergent ethnic population. It drew some of the ruling Ahoms even including some Brahmins magnetically to its fold. At one stroke, the Devine right Theory on which the

concept of Ahom monarchy was built up through the Brahmanical influence, was rudly shaken with th emergence of the *Bhakti* cult.

The *neo-vaishnavite* movement could not meet the conservative forces of the time. Instead, it made a compromise by sanctioning the observance of traditional rites and performance of the animal sacrifices by the ruling Ahom monarchs. Otherwise also , the first support to the *Bhakti* movement came from some of the *Kayastha Bhuyan* chief who recently lost their political power in the hands of the Ahoms and who were also joined by some Brahmin intellectuals as well as other professional traders and artisans. Sankardeva, the father of the *Bhakti* movement in Assam, was also *Kayastha Bhuyan* chief. Therefore, it did not take much time to transform the Raj *Bhakti* to guru *Bhakti*. The subsequent leaders of the movement after Sankardeva, instead of fighting against the social inequalities, turned theselves into an agency of collaboration with the Ahom rulers because a title to the headship of a *Satra* was the means to command over a large number of people and to enormous wealth and power.

Another significant aspect of this movement was the mass room growth of *Satra* institutions. It developed both on royal patronage and popular support which became the sanctuaries for truant *pykes*. It is clear in history that the later Ahom rulers, after Rudrasingha (1696-1714), lacked efficiency of statesmanship to handle the new situation since the *satras* were already acquiring the position of powerful social organization. The rulers failed to control their rising through reconciliations by bringing in meaningful reforms in the feudal nature of the state. In this course the Ahom rulers adopted the policy of putting *Saktism* against *Vaishnavism* in the religious sphere. In such situation, *neo-vaishnavism* and *Saktism* confronted each other in the race for political power and influence in which the spiritual nobility became conterminous with the feudalistic elements. Eventually, this failure of the rulers was happened to be a heavy cause of the outbreak of the Moamaria rebellion.

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