



Hinduism In The Ahom Court In The Context Of Changing Religious Policies: A Historical Study.

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Abstract: The Ahoms, who migrated from Southeast Asia, made a significant contribution to the formation of the broader Assamese society after founding the Ahom kingdom during the medieval period. They brought with them their own religious beliefs and customs but in the due course of time, they gradually adopted Hindu religion while still preserving their distinct religious and cultural practices. They established several *Satras*, erected numerous and famous temples in various parts of the kingdom. To patronize these *Satras* and temples, they granted a large amount of revenue free land grants along with valuable donations and gifts and also assigned people known as *Bahatiyas paiks*. Though, the Ahom rulers were liberal in their religious policy by patronising the three major cults of Hinduism-Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism but they altered their policy based on the demands of the situation. This study aims to analyse the importance of the Hinduisation of the Ahom rulers and their changing religious policy, whenever necessary.

Keywords: The Ahoms, religious policy, Vaishnavism, Shaktism, Satras, Brahmins.

Introduction

The Ahoms, members of the Shan branch of the great Tai or Thai family, belonged to the Mongoloid race of South-East Asia. Originally, they were inhabitants of Maulung in Upper Burma. They entered the Brahmaputra Valley through the Patkai Mountain pass in the first half of the thirteenth century. Thereafter, Sukapha, the head of the migrant group, founded a small kingdom with its capital at Charaideo, in the present-day Sibsagar district of Assam. Over time, they gradually expanded their kingdom eastward, southward, and westward. During the course of this expansion, they came into close contact with the local inhabitants such as the Chutiyas, the Kacharis, the Bhuyans, and other tribes of the region. However, there was no socio-religious conflict between the Ahoms and other inhabitants of the region. Together, they continued to follow their own traditional religious customs and rites.

At the beginning, the Ahoms worshipped their own gods and goddesses with sacrifices and offerings. The Ahoms believed that they were the descendants of Khunlung and Khunlai, who were sent by Lengdon (the God of Heaven) to rule over the earth. They were required to carry the image of their tutelary deity Chom Cheng, also known as Somdeo. Other important deities included Kao-Kham, the god of water; Jasingpha,

the goddess of learning; Phai, the god of fire; and Phuratara, the god of creator. In order to perform their religious ceremonies and astrological works, they had their own priests, such as the Deodhai, the Mahan, the Bailung, and the Chiring. There were numerous books and works that provided detailed accounts of astrological forecasts, religious calendar, the rituals involving worship of deities, and the custom of comparing horoscopes of the bride and the groom.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is descriptive-cum-analytical. The study is primarily based on secondary sources of information. Relevant material and information have been collected from a variety of sources, including reference books, articles, journals, published works, proceedings, and web-based resources.

Hinduism in the Ahom Court and the Religious Policy of the Ahom Rulers.

Initially, the Ahom rulers did not interfere with the local and traditional belief of their subjects, and at the same time, they continued to maintain their own custom and traditions. However, due to certain circumstances, they gradually adopted a policy of religious intermixing and eventually accepted Brahmanical Hinduism. This process began during the reign of Sudangpha, also known as Bamuni Konwar, who, under specific circumstances, was born and brought up in a Brahmin family. After his accession to the throne, he brought the Brahman family with him. With the arrival of the Brahman family, the worship of Lakshmi-Narayan- Salagram or of god of Vishnu marked the first official entrance of Hinduism into the Ahom royal court. As a result, the worship of Vishnu continued alongside the Ahom deity *Chom-cheng* (*Chomdeo*). This marked the first officially recorded patronage of Hinduism by the Ahom rulers, which eventually led to their conversion to the faith. The king appointed his Brahmana foster-father as his confidential adviser and placed members of the Brahman family in various responsible post of the state. This incident open up a new episode of Brahmanical influence in the Ahom court. It had far-reaching effect on the social, political, and cultural history of the Ahoms.

However, the necessity of patronizing Hinduism was gradually realized by the Ahom rulers, as they extended their dominion southwards, northwards, and westwards. They understood the value of broad popular support because since expansion of the state came at the expense of neighboring powers such as the chutiyas, the Kacharis, and the Bhuyans. At the same time, they also faced frequent invasion by Muslim force. Therefoe, the king Suhungmung also known as Dihingia Raja, took a further step in welcoming Hinduism into the royal court by performing various Brahmanical ceremonies and rituals within the royal household. He adopted the *Saka era* in official records in place of the Ahom system of calculation, assumed the Hindu title *Swarganarayan* and minted coins bearing legends in Devanagari scripts. During his reign, the first Assamese *buranji* entitle *Sri Sri Swarganarayan Maharajar Janma Katha* was written, in which, the origin of the Ahom was traced to the Aryan god Indra, which marked the another forward step in their gradual conversation to Hinduism. In the case of Pratap Singha also known as Susengpha, it was evident that he also compelled to follow a similarly cordial policy towards Hinduism due to comparable

circumstances. Although he did not formally convert to Hinduism, he became devout follower of Saivism and built a few Shiva temples in the kingdom.

King Sutamla alias Jayadhvaj Singha was the first Ahom king to formally accept the Vaishnavism cult of Hinduism. He received initiation from Niranjandev, who was established by the Ahom king as the first Satradhikar of the great Auniati Satra in Majuli. During the period from the reign of Jayadhvaj Singha up to Sulikpha, also known as Lara Raja, Vaishnavism became the predominant faith in the Ahom court. But Gadadhar Singha inclined towards Shaktism. His adoption of Shaktism marked a turning point in the religious policy of the Ahoms. As an orthodox Shakta, he began persecuting the Vaishnava Mahantas and *Gosains*. At the same time, he built the Shiva temple at Umananda in Guwahati and granted revenue-free lands to Brahamans. Behind the act of persecution, his main intention was to curb the growing influence and power of the Vaishnava Satras and bring them under the control of royal authority. However, his son Rudra Singha did not follow the same policy of persecution as his father. He adopted a liberal policy and extended equal patronage to the three principal religious sects -Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism. This policy was designed in such a way that the support of the heads of Vaishnavism along with the status of the *Deodhais* who were the chief priests of the original Ahom religion, remained unimpaired. However, in the later part of his reign, he became an open supporter of Shaktism and from his death onwards that faith became the creed of the Ahom monarchs as well as the principal nobles and officials. Thus, Shaktism became the religion of the rulers while Vaishnavism became the religion of the majority of the ruled. However, most of the Ahom monarchs, showed due regards to the Vaishnava priest and made grants and endowments to the Vaishnava *Satras*. At the same time, they continued the practice of erecting Hindu temples accompanied by land grants and *paiks*, while also extending patronage to the Ahom priests. However, it is evident that Sukhampha or Khura Raja brought artisans from Cooch Behar in Bengal to an make idol of Goddess Durga and then celebrated Durga puja in the kingdom

The process of Hinduisiation reached its climax during the reign of King Shiva Singha, under the influence and initiative of his chief queen, Phuleswari, who was later made the Bar Raja or Chief King. They formally received initiation from a Bengali Brahman priest named *Parvatiya Gosain*, who was placed in charge of the Kamakhya temple, the famous Shakti shrine of Hinduism. At the advice of this priest, she attempted to make Shaktism the state religion. She tried to convert the entire population to Shakta cult by force. To execute her plan, she even summoned the Shudra *Mahants* of Satras to attend the *Durga Puja* held at a Shakta shrine, where she compelled them to have their foreheads smeared with the blood of sacrificed animals, bow their heads before the goddess, and accept *nirmali* and *prasad*. This event had a significant impact on the political, socio-religious landscape of the state. It led to a conflict between Shaktism and Vaishnavism and later became one of the major cause of the famous Moamariya Rebellion. She also tried to suppress the old-age Ahom custom of burying of their dead and compelled them to adopt cremation. She had the Gaurisagar tank excavated near the capital city and built three temples on its bank dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi. She was succeeded by her sister Draupadi, who also became the Bar Raja or Chief

queen. Following the example of her elder sister, she had the Shivasagar tank excavated at Rangpur, in the capital city and constructed three temples on its banks dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi.

The influence of Hinduism in the Ahom court continued during the reign of King Rajeswar Singha. He was an orthodox Hindu and after his accession, undertook a religious pilgrimage to Guwahati offer worship at the various temples. He also erected many temples and made generous gifts to the Brahmins. A devout follower of the Nati Gosain, he built a temple in honour of his priest at Pandunath. He shifted the capital to another place called Rangpur, following the advice of a Hindu priest. His cremation ceremony was performed according to Brahminical custom and the same practice was continued by his successors.

The period following after the death of Rajeswar Singha, once again witnessed the persecution of the Vaishnavas. As Laxmi Singha, the son and successor of Rajeswar Singha, was a staunch follower of Shaktism, one of his officers named Kirti Chandra Barbaruah insulted *Deka Mahanta* Gagini Bayan of the Mayamara Satra to fulfil his selfish zealous intentions. Shortly after, two disciples of the Mayamara Satra-Nahar Khora and Ragha Moran were mercilessly punished on the basis of a false allegation over a minor issue. As a result, his reign marked the beginning of the Moamariya rebellion, which became one of the major causes of the decline of the Ahom kingdom. On the advice of Brahman priest, he organized a puja in honour of Goddess Taraka, another name of Goddess Durga, and offered valuable donations and gifts to the Brahman pandits.

Laxmi Singha was succeeded by Gaurinath Singha who also continued the Vaishnava persecution initiated by his immediate predecessors. As a result, the second and third phases of the Moamariya rebellion took place during his reign. Eventually, he was compelled to seek external assistance from the British due to the growing conflict between the Ahom royalty and the Moamariya disciples, which arose from the continued policy of Vaishnava persecution by the Ahom monarchs. Thus, It is evident that the process of Hinduisisation of the court was completed by the end of the eighteenth century.

Conclusion

With the reign of Sudangpha, also known as Bamuni Konwar, the influence of Hinduism penetrated the Ahom court and reached its peak during the reign of Shiva Singha (1714-1744). It is generally believed that the process of Hinduisisation was a deliberate policy adopted by the Ahom rulers. However, they did not interfere in the social life of any community; rather they adopted a liberal policy towards the diverse ethnic and religious elements within their jurisdiction. As a result, there was no socio-religious conflict until the later period of the Ahom rule, except for the conflict with Vaishnavism, which was the religion of the majority population and was considered a real source of danger.

Keeping in view the numerical minority of the Ahom population and with the intention to gaining power, strength and consolidating the Ahom kingdom by following a conciliatory policy, Ahom rulers encourage the inter-mingling of religion, marriage, and culture. As a result, the Ahom rule brought significant changes to the society, economy, politics, religion, language, culture of the entire Brahmaputra Valley, ultimately shaping a composite Assamese nationality.

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