

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES OF AHOM PERIOD DURING MEDIEVAL ASSAM

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Introduction

The people of the Brahmaputra valley, at the time of the advent of the *Ahoms* under the leadership of Sukapha, were composed of two broad divisions – the Hindus and the Non-Hindu tribes.(Baruah,2013:414) The Hindus included the Brahmanas, the caste Hindus, the Hinduised royal families and other converts, whose members were gradually, were increase. The non-Hindu tribes were called *Sudirs* or *Sudras*. The *Sudirs* living in their respective tribal areas had formed the mass of the subject population. The Brahmanas were privileges as the members of the priestly class. As a privilege and respected class, they have to learn Sanskrit at the *tolas* and enjoyed important offices in administration. Among the non-Brahmana or the *Sudir* castes , mention may be made of the *Kayasthas*(accountants),the *Ganakas*(astrologers), *Keots*(cultivators) ,the *Kalitas* , who monopolized the traders and other professions in the country. They were considered castes Hindus.(Borpujari 1994:171-173) Besides these there were some other Hindu communities like the *Barias*, *Suts* and *Kaivartas*. Another distinct class of the medieval period of Assam was the Yogis or Nath, whose occupation was snake –charming, silk rearing or drum beating. The Yogis performed their social and religious rites by their own priests.

The Chutiyas, Kacharis, Marans and the Barahis were the ruling tribes in the eastern Brahmaputra valley. Among themselves, the Chutiyas were only Hindus. Other Hinduised tribes were Bhuyans, Khens and the Koches who ruled in the western valley were also Hindus. (Baruah *op.cit*:414)

The *Ahoms* were originally group of *Tai-Shans* and the seven principal *Ahom* clans were known as *Satgharia Ahoms* which means the *Ahoms* of the seven houses. The *Ahom* aristocracy was formed by the *Satghariya Ahoms*. (Borpujari *op.cit*:83-84) The first three houses were- the royal family, *Buragohain* family and *Borgohain* family. The other four families were- the *Deodhai*, *Mohan*, *Bailung* and *Siring* families of priests and astrologers. In the passage of time, the families of *Lahan*, *Sandikai*, *Dihingia* and *Duwarah* joined the aristocracy and tried to supersede the families of priests and astrologers. (Baruah *op.cit*:415) Some of the inferior *Ahom* families were-the *Chaodangs*, *Garphalias*, *Likchows* etc. The members of the *Satgharia Ahoms* did not intermarry with them. There were also some professional communities. They were - the *Banias* (traders), *Tantis* (weavers), *Hiras* (potters), *Sonowals* (gold-washers), *Telis* (oil-men), *Nadials* (fisherman), *Haris* (scavengers) etc. But only a few like the *Hiras* formed a real caste in that period. (ibid)

The *Ahom* Kings had matrimonial relations with all the Aryan and Non-Aryan Kings of the land during their 600 years of rule. Though, the *Ahom* King should marry his Chief Queen from one of the seven high ranking families who came with Sukapha. But in practice, it was seemed that they married from different castes and communities of Assam. The *Ahom* rulers in course of their time increased their strength by incorporating *Chutiyas*, *Kacharis*, *Borahis*, *Morans* etc .into their own community. (Rajkumar2000:52) They also included people of other races and tribes like Hindu *Kalita*, Hindu *Dhuba*, *Koch*, *Miri*, *Naga* etc. The *Ahom* Kings Suhungmung, Suklenmung, Sukhampha, Susenpha, Rajeswar Singha, Chandrakanta Singha etc. married from different castes , communities and tribes. During and after the *Moamriya* rebellion and the Burmese invasions; intermixture of blood between different caste and community also happened.

The main feature of the *Ahom* ruler and Administrator was their ability to acknowledge the merit of a person irrespective of their caste and creed. In such a liberal policy greatly helped in diminishing the alien character of the *Ahoms*. It also contributed to the cultural Synthesis and amalgamation process of various races and tribes in whole Brahmaputra valley. (ibid:52-53)

Clothing and Shelter including Food Security

During the *Ahom* period, dresses were made of indigenous products like cotton, *Eri*, *Muga*, *Pat*, *Tassor* and wool. (Sarma2001:253) The common terms used for cloth in Assamese is *Kapor*, which is believed to be variation of Sanskrit term *Karpata*. The *Ahom* introduced the custom of wearing of *Bachol* and *Tangali* by the higher officials in their state. The *Ahom* King Rudra Singha (1696-1714AD) first introduced Mughal dresses viz, *Pag*, *Jama* and *ijar* in his court. (Hussain 2012:157) The Dress worn by King Rudra Singha and Siva Singha, as shown in the *Hastividyanava*, are Mughal dresses. Prior to King Rudra Singha the *Ahom* Kings used a sort of head-gear or *turban*, tied over their head, called *Phachau*. But since the time of King Rudra Singha, the *pag* used by the Mughal nobles had been introduced among the *Ahom* Kings, in place of *phachau*. Garments worn by persons were of two types - Upper Garments and Lower Garments.

The garments and the ornaments during the *Ahom* period are mentioned below:

Dresses/Ornaments	Man	Woman
Upper Garment	<i>Cheleng Kapor, Khania Kapor, Bor-Kapor, Chola, Turban, Gamocha(Towel), Tangali(linen girdle of belt), Bachol, Tupi(Cap), Tanga, Kurta(Shirt), Japi, (Umbrella) Kabas Kapor, Gati, Thenga etc.</i>	<i>Hachati, Pakharutong, Riha, Jhardar or Mongjuri, Japi etc.</i>
Lower Garment	<i>Churia or Dhuti, Ijar(Trousers), Khadam, Ghuri, Poijar, etc.</i>	<i>Mekhela</i>
Ornaments	<i>Ear-Rings(Long-Keru, Lokapara, Karna-Bhusan, Makara-Kundala, Hangsa-Kundala), Finger Rings, Necklace(Mogordana, Dhol Biri, Joon</i>	<i>Keru(Uka-Keru, Tita-Koria Keru, Boroi-loga Keru, Boroi-loga-dighal Keru, Bakharua Keru, Jangphai keru etc.), Thuria (Jangphai-Thuria, Bakharua-Thuria, Uka-</i>

<i>Biri, Dharia Biri, Bena, Silikha Madali, Kathal-Kuhia Madali, Mackh Bakharua Madali, dugdugi, Sonar har, Motamoni, Bajju or Keyura, Bracelatets(Chheo-Kharu, Gam-Kharu), Nupur, Siropoes(Kalki, Kiriti, Mukut), Pachai, Satsori, Navasari, Chandrahar, Gazera etc.</i>	<i>Thuria, Bakharpota-Thuria etc.), Kanphul, Latkon, Kanthasa, Suna or Makori, Nejepota, Finger Rings(Hira-potua-Angathi, Uka-Angathi, Babori-Phuli-Angathi, Sene-Pata-Angathi, Jethineguria-Angathi, Bakharami-Angathi, Mora-Nejia-Angathi etc), Biri(Galpata and Gazera, Bena, Thupi Moni, Uluma Moni, Madoli, Cheomoni Etc.), Nakphul etc.</i>
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In the medieval period, the subjects of the *Ahom* rulers were generally inhabited along the river banks for easier communication, transportation, water supply etc. The villages of the pre-*Ahom* period were situated on higher ground. But the villages of *Ahom* people were situated of low-lying areas due to habit of wet-cultivation in more fertile or suitable land, easy access or availability of the daily requisites, facility for rearing essential like goats, cows, buffalos, pigs, ducks etc. They introduced a new economic system in Assam. The non-Aryan peoples including *Ahoms* used to lived in the houses of raised platform known as *Chang Ghar*. The inhabitants of the *Ahom* period built their houses with easily available natural products like wood, bamboo, canes, reeds, thatch, clay etc.

In the medieval period, food habit of the *Ahom* became assimilated with the original ancestors of Assam. *Dak*⁶ had narrated elaborately about the choice of the food of the Assamese people. Moreover one can gather ample information in this respect from *Kumar Haran, Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra*. These records mention that the Assamese people used to take food in four times a day. The food taken in the morning time and also before sunset was considered to be refreshment and the food taken at noon and evening were deliberated to the principal food of the day. (Sarma *op.cit*:246)

Rice is the staple food of Assam. There were two varieties of rice (*chauls*). One is *Ukhuwa-chaul* and other is *Arai-chaul*. The paddies are classified into three varieties. These are *Sali, Lahi* and *Ahu*. With the main meals at noon and in the evening the Assamese people used

to take various curries prepared with the fish or meat or green leaves and other vegetables fried in mustard oil. The Assamese people have been using different kinds of pulses such as *Mati*, *Magu*, *Machur* and *kalai*. Fried or boiled eggs of ducks or other birds are also taken along with the main meals. To increase the taste of their meals, the people used to take various sorts of condiment and pickles. They knew how to prepare *Kharicha* from the tender shoots of the bamboos. Another very favorite condiment of Assamese people was made from pounded mustard seeds mixed salt and alkaline solution called *Kahudi-Kharali*. The Assamese people had the habit of using *Pachala* which was prepared by banana tree using alkaline solution in it. Salt was very rare at that time. The Assamese people also used *Jira*, *Dhania*, *Ada*, *Jalakia*, *Tezpat*, *Piyaj*, *Naharu*, *Mithi*, *Jani*, *Kaljira*, *jaluk* etc. The most commonly used food for refreshment or *Jolpan* primarily known as *Kumol Chaul* or *Pithaguri* in Assamese. Besides these, the Assamese people used *Sandah*, *Muri*, *Akhai*, *laru* etc. The Assamese people were very fond of taking fruits after little rest at mid day. The advent of the Muhammadans introduced new dishes of fruits such as *polao*, *korma*, *khichdi* etc. among the Assamese people. The people had a habit of betel nuts chewing with betel leaves and lime after taking meal. Some people in addition to lime, add tobacco also with it. (*ibid*:251-252) Another common practice among the people was the habit of tobacco smoking. Among the *Ahoms*, taking of wine was in vogue in all their social and religious ceremonies and functions. But the Hinduised *Ahoms* gradually became more indifferent to the use of it. All those tribes, who were accustomed to drinking wine, had their own indigenous process of making it out of rice and other herbs. The liquor is called *Mad* or *Lao-pani*. The habit of taking opium was also prevalent. *Ganja* or *bhanga* was in practice in Assam from the remote past. The food habits of pre-*Ahom* age and the *Ahom* age was almost the same. Later on many new habits came into force. Geographical environment played a very vital role in this regard.

Women's Status in the Family and Larger Society

In *Ahom* period, Joint family was common. The society was a patriarchal society. (Baruah *op.cit*:421) So daughters had no right to their father's properties. Women enjoyed great freedom in the society at that time, though the position of women was subordinate to man. It was the impact of the tribal society. In medieval period, there was no *purdah system*. According to Shihabuddin Talish, the wives of the Rajas and the peasants alike never veiled their faces before

anybody and they moved about in the market places with bare heads.(*ibid*) Women not only played an important role in rearing up children and doing household duties, but also helped in cultivation in every stage except ploughing. All women from queen to commoners were efficient in spinning and weaving. Though the girls had no formal education, but they taught in morality and spiritualism from the elder members of the family.

During the *Ahom* period, woman participated in the war as commander. Mulagabhoru who was a brave woman during the reign of King Suhungmung, fight against the Turbak Khan in 1532 AD. Joymati Konwari, wife of Godapani, sacrificed her life for the welfare of the *Ahom* state.

In *Ahom* administration system, women also acted as the head of the state also. For example, during the reign of King Siva Singha, his three queens named Phuleswari, Ambika and Draupadi ruled the *Ahom* state as *BorRaja*.(*ibid*:294-295) Kuranganayani, the wife of King Rajeswar Singha saved the *Ahom* dynasty from the *Moamorias*.

The women were honoured in the *Ahom* age. We have seen that King Godadhar Singha build the stone bridge, constructed and excavated tank in the name of Rohdoi who saved his life. Similarly, King Rudra Shingha excavated the *Joysagar tank* and *Joydole* in the memory of his mother Joymoti Konwari. King Shiva Singha constructed the *Dhai Ali* in the memory of his Care taker (*Dhai*). King Gaurinath Singha made *Naphuki Aideur maidam* in the memory of his step-mother Naphuki.

Marriage Rites and Funeral Rites during the Ahom's Rule

The Hinduised Assamese people performed their marriages according to the Vedic rites. The *Ahoms* performed it to their own rites called *Chaklang*.(*ibid*:422) Vedic rites were observed when the *Ahom* Kings married Hindu girls. At that time, the sacrificial part of the ceremony was solemnized in the brides place in the marriages. But in the marriage of the King, the bride had to proceed to the groom's place.

There was no dowry system among the Hinduised and non-Hindu tribes. Instead of this, the groom had to pay the bride-price which was called *ga-dhan*. There was no child marriage among the *Ahoms*. But it was prevailed among the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas in medieval

Assam. (ibid) In tribal communities, girls could choose their own husbands. Even in case of the settled marriages, the consent of the girls was necessary. The grown up boys and girls had a chance to mix freely and some entering into marriage bonds at that time. Widow Remarriage was prevailed at that time except the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas.

The Hindus observed Vedic funeral rites and the non-Hindu tribes observed their respective tribal rites in medieval Assam. Even after their Hinduisation through Neo-Vaishnavism, some tribes used to bury their dead using their traditional funeral rites. The *Ahom* Kings were buried their dead in vaults known as Maidams. The *Ahom* kings to cremation and performed their funeral ceremonies according to Vedic rites from the time of Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769AD). (Baruah 2013:244)

Leisure Time Activities/Recreation

For the enjoyment of the leisure time, the *Ahom* rulers patronized games and sports in their royal courts. The fights of different animals like elephant, bull, buffalo, tiger, bear and crocodile and birds like cocks and hawks, between their own species or with others. Hawk fight was the favourite pastime at that time. There was a well organized *Khel* under an officer called *Senchowa Barua* for training the hawks. Hunting and catching elephant was the favourite game of *Ahom* Kings. King Rudra Singha appointed various officers like *Rangial Barua*, *Kukurachowa Barua* etc. for promotion of the Games and Sports. Wrestling, jugglery and acrobatic feats were imported from Bengal in the later part of the *Ahom* rule. (Bhuyan 1990:149-154)

The games and sports were performed at *Rupahi pathar* in *Ahom* period. The King and the nobles enjoyed the performance from *Rangghar*. (Rajkumar op.cit:177) The games and sports were organized at the time of coronation ceremony, royal wedding, the visit of the foreign King, *Bihu* festival etc. Storytelling, swimming, rowing, *dhop khel*, dice, kite-flying, cowries, hide and seek, etc. were the main pastimes of the *Ahom* period. Horns, Flutes, Trumpets, tabors, drums etc. were the common musical instruments of that period. King Rudra Singha was highly impressed by the Mughal music. So he sent Assamese musicians to Delhi to learn the playing of instruments like *Pakhuj*. (ibid:189) The *Ahom* King appointed certain officers like *Gayam Barua* for the promotion of music.

Conclusion

From the above discussions we have seen that the *Ahoms* adopted a very liberal policy in their social dealings which were dominated mainly by consideration of practical necessity and political expediency. Sukapha and his successors followed that liberal policy towards the tribes and this did must to bring about amalgamation of *Tai-Ahoms* with various tribes of the Brahmaputra valley.

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