CHAPTER VI

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I. The Policy of the Koch rulers:

At the time of the establishment and expansion of the koch kingdom in the lower Brahmaputtra Valley most of the people were either Hindu or were Hinduised. However tribal beliefs were also continued among a considerable section of the people. In lower Assam specially from Kāmarūpa to further west of the valley, apparently the Hindu beliefs and social systems predominated since long time past. The Bhuyans and the Brahmanas living there spread it in the nook and corner of the valley. During the 15th and 16th centuries A.D. when the Bhakti movement was started by Sankardeva and his followers Hinduism became far more wide-spread. It has been seen the Koches who formed their kingdom under Biswa Singha in the early 16th century A.D. were largely Hinduised, but the common folk still then had their own tribal religious beliefs.¹

It is to be noted that the king’s religion is generally different in essence from the religion of the masses. It is because, the religion of the ruling class is always governed by some contemporary socio-political situations backed by political interests. As a matter of fact, in spite of their having traditional beliefs, the Koch kings sharply reacted to the beliefs of the masses. This was because of to enlist the support of the most intelligent class of the land, the Brahmanas and to appease and control the conquered tribes and the feudal lords, the Buyans who were deprived of their states. The founder Koch king Biswa Singha immediately after becoming the king accepted Brahmanical Hinduism and converted himself to the Hindu fold leaving the yoke of his tribal identity. From the very beginning Biswa Sigha vigorously patronised the Brahmana priestly class and worshipped Śiva and Durgā. As well as he

¹. The DRV mentions that Koch soldiers recruited from among the peasant population of the tribe, who used to practised the tribal modes of worship with the offerings of wine and flesh. When they came to invade Ahom kingdom in 1562 (Vv. 325-338). But the Koch king Naranarayana then had a high respect for cows and Brahmanas and thus a devoted Hindu. (ABMSJC p. 39)
patronised the worship of Visnu also and gave gifts to Vaisnava priest and astrologers.² It has not been found that Biswa singha tried to strict his own beliefs as the state religion as a whole.

In our previous discussion it is found that Biswa Singha’s two son Malladev and Sukladhvaj (Naranarayan and Chilarai) were educated at Benaras, the erstwhile centre of Brahmanical Hinduism. Under the influence of the ideal of high caste Hindus, a deep sympathy for Hindu manners, customs and ideals was rooted in their hearts. Hence they made an attempt to introduce those ideas and customs among their subject people after their accession to the power. But at that time a large section of the population of Kāmarūpa followed the religion of Mlechas, Sadāchāra and Brahmachrāya being unknown to them. Though the rule of Kāyastha had lasted in the country for a long time before the rise of Koches and though the Bhuyans had followed to a considerable extent the manners and customs prevailing in Gauda, yet they never dared to interfere with the religious beliefs and manners of the masses. However through the efforts of the king Naranarayan and Chilarai the Varnas and Asrāms in keeping with the Kaumudi’s of Sidhāntavāgisa were established in Kāmarūpa. At this stage the people of various persuasions in the kingdom came to be known as Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras.³ Thus there came into existence different gradations of rank in the society. As a result the Brahmanical Hinduism was deep rooted and Sidhāntavāgisa became the social dictator. He prescribed the rites and ceremonies to be observed by the various classes of the people of the society and his voice was supreme in matters relating to the social positions of each class. If anybody had violated the role promulgated by Sidhāntavāgisa he was punished by the king, in serious cases even drove out with his family from the kingdom.⁴

In this way with the patronization of Naranarayan and Chilarai the Brahmanical religion and authority secured a firm root in the whole of Kāmarūpa. Although according to their respective traditions the king or the tribal chiefs of the Koch and Mech tribes would first worshipped their deities in all religious ceremony, but now however, with the ascendancy of the Brahmanas,

² HAG, P, 50, ABGB, P. 41
³ Brihat RājāVamsāvali, Vv. 1791-1792.
⁴ Ibid, Vv. 1793-94
this ancient custom was abolished. In Sidhāntavāgīsa’s Smrīti Kaumudī Brahmanas alone have been allowed the right of worshipping Saktī.5 Even the Koch and Mech king were debarred from worshipping the goddess Kāmākhyā by laid down a superstitious of a curse of Devi Kāmākhyā.

However although in the time of Naranarayan the ancient customs were fast changing in Kāmarūpa as on the Sidhāntavāgīsa, yet outside its border the ancient customs still swaying. Naranarayan had to give due respect to the religious customs of the masses. In this regard DRV gives the following accounts:

“The King proclaimed to all with a vow that it was his royal command that in all temples lying to the north of the Gosain Kamal Āli which was the line of demarcation between western and eastern Assam, the Koches and the Meches would continue to perform the worship, while in the south the Brahmanas would officiate. This law was the hold good in all places. The Bhotas and the Kachāries would eat farmented liqure and rice. They shall have to give me gold and horse for the enjoyment of their lands.”6

The accounts depict the religious policy followed by Naranarayan and Chilarai in their early period of the reign. It appears from the account that supremacy of the Brahmana was established in modern Koch Behār and in the modern districts of the Goalgārī, Kāmrūp, Nawgāon and Darrang, but in the north of Gosāin Kamal Āli, i.e. in eastern Assam comprising the districts of present Lakhimpur, Śivasāgar and Naga hills and the adjoining places, the ancient customs continued to be in vogue.7 In order to introduce among all classes of men the manners and customs of the Brahmanical Hinduism Naranarayan brought learned Brahmanas

6. DRV, Vv. 336-338
7. For the easy communication and for rapid movements during a proposed expedition to the Āhom territory, king Naranarayan caused to build a road from his capital Koch Behār to Nārāyanpur of present Lakhimpur district of Assam, which was completed in 1547 A.D. It was built under supervision of the king’s brother Gohain Kamal for which the road is still known as Gohain Kamal Ali. This road later on became the line of control in between the Koch Hājo and Koch Behār respectively. Vide. HAG. P.52.
8. N.N. Vasu, P. 63

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from Gauda and Kāmrūpa to write and publish the Hindu religious books in the popular
dialect. Hence he made all necessary arrangement for the spread of Sanskrit learning among
the masses for the establishment of the Brahmanical Hinduism.

However in the middle of their reign, Naranarayan and Chilarai have to change their
religious attitude at the eve of Bhakti movement led by Sankaradeva. When Sankaradeva had
taken shelter at Koch Behar from Ahom Kingdom, there rose the religious conflict between
the Sankara's neo-Vaisnavite faith and the Brahmana priestly class who were the strict follower
of Varnāsrama dharma. As a result of which the king and his brother general Chilarai had to
take a liberal attitude towards the religion. Generally the religion of the ruling class is always
governed by some contemporary socio-political situations backed by political interests. Hence
though Naranarayan and Chilarai in spite of their inclination towards traditional beliefs, sharply
reacted to the beliefs of the Brahmanical Hinduism and patronised to introduce the Varnāsrama
dharma according to the Brahminacal rite. However they had to change their religious policy
at the eve of Sankaradeva's neo-Vaisnava faith. The practice of human equality in neo-Vaisnavite
faith in the face of strict caste distinction of the spiritual plane subsequently had a profound
impact on the socio-political life of the common people. King's brother Chilarai being influenced
by the Sankara's popularity among the masses as a religious preacher of a neo-faith and the
depth of knowledge and saintly character got initiated and even married Sankara's nice
Kamalpriya the daughter of Rāmarūi Āta.9 Naranarayan also had to change his attitude towards
Sankara being satisfied with the Sankara's depth of knowledge in the scholarly debate with
his Brahmana Scholar of the court. Being highly satisfied Naranarayan became a friend of
Sankara and even wanted to have initiation to Sankara's faith, which however did not
materialised.10 Both the brother from their royal end offered the full patronage to Sankara
and his vaisnava followers and gave full freedom to preach the neo-Vaisnava faith in Koch
kingdom. Naranarayan offered him the post of Gomāstā or the administrative officer over the
modern Barpeta region, and also donated him lands to establish a Satra at Bhelādungā (later

9. KGC, Pp. 137-38
10. Ibid, P.p. 280 f.
known as Madhupur)\textsuperscript{11} near Koch capital. Besides Naranarayan issued a declaration permitting the free propagation of his teachings amongst his subject people.\textsuperscript{12} With such a royal patronage, people from all walks of life became converts to the new creed and within a short time neo-Vaisnavism became the religion of the people in the Koch kingdom. However, yet Nranarayan did not left his traditional offerings to Saivism and Saktism and he performed the Durgā puja annually at Devi Bari of his capital. In this Pālce there didnot worshipping the other goddess like Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kārtika and Ganesha, except ten armed Durgā. This was his dynastic worship of ten armed devi Durgā.\textsuperscript{13} This policy he adopted for the smooth running of all round socio-political conditions of the state.

Naranarayan’s son and successor Lakhminarayan the king of Koch Behār also followed the same religious policy of his father. His court was adorned with both Brahmana and neo-vaisnavite learned scholars. One of his court poet Govinda Mishra a learned Brahmana translated eighteen Parvas of Bhāgavata Gitā into Kamatā Kamrupi or Rājvamsi language, which is the only complete translation of Gitā during the period in eastern India.\textsuperscript{14} He offered full patronage to neo-Vaisnavite preacher Mādhavdeva and Dāmodaradeva to spread the teachings among his subjects and declared the Vaisnavite form of Hindu religion as his state religion. He evern stop the animal offerings at the every royal adoration paid to God.\textsuperscript{15} He had even taken initiation to Dāmodara deva.\textsuperscript{16} However like his father Naranarayan he also did not leave the traditional offerings to Saivaism. As sources witnessed Lakhinara ran founded the ‘Lulark Kund’ at Varanasi and re-establihed the worshipping of Jalpeswar Śiva at Jalpeswar Śiva temple.\textsuperscript{17} With his patronisation both the Brahmana and neo-Vaisnava scholars wrote many famous religious books, such as Bhakti Ratnāvali, Nāma Mallikā, and Sri Krishna Janna Rahasya by Mādhavdeva and Śivaratri Kaumudi, Mantradrikshā Kaumudi,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Rāmcharan, Vv. 3606-09; KGC, p. 252
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid, Vv. 3507-08; Bardowa Gurucharit, P. 91
\item \textsuperscript{13} KBI, P. 139
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ajoy Kumār, Literature in Kamatā Koch Behār Raj-Darbar, Dhubri, 1964. P.85
\item \textsuperscript{15} KBI, p. 151
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid,P.152; Dāmodaradeva Charit (Gurulila),Vv.655ff.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid, P,63; KBI, P,152.
\end{itemize}

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Sankranti Kaumudi, Ekadashi kaumudi and Grahan Kaumudi was written by Sidhantavagisa. To appease the both Brahmanic and Vaisnavite followers of the kingdom he followed such a religious policy.

After the death of Lakhminarayan the later kings of Koch Behar did not deviated much from the same religious policy. Bir Narayana's court was adorned with both Brahmanic and Vaisnavite learned scholars. His reign witnessed the establishment of the Chaturbhuj Thākura (four armed Visnu) at Bheldunga village at Koch Behar and reconstruction of Bāneswars temple. During the reign of his son and successor Prannarayan same status and patronage was offered towards both the religious faith. Although he was personally the follower of Brahmanic Hinduism, yet he offered same support towards Vaisnavas also. In his court a forum named 'Pancharatna' (Scholars forum of five) always engaged in literary activities. The learned personalities produced so many important religious literature during his reign. The author of 'Guru Charita' Rāma Rāya was one of the scholar of his court. Vanamāli Gosāin of Madhupur was the royal priest of his time. Modnarayan succeeded Prannarayan and he was succeeded by Vasudevnarayan, although they were personally the worshipper of Śiva and Sakti yet they followed a liberal religious policy. He granted land as Devottar for the maintainance and completed the renovation work of the Jalpeswar Śiva temple. But the reign of Mohendranarayan witnessed the flow of Vaisnavism as the kings religion. He devoted his daily life with the recitation of Hari Nāma Prasanga and accepted vegetarian foods. His court was also adorned with learned scholars of both Vaisnavas and Brahmanas. One Rati Kāntā Mishra was his royal priest. Vaisnava scholar Rāma Saraswati translated the Bhisma Parva of Mahābhārata at the request of the king. After him, taking advantage of the internal crisis one usurper Rupnarayan ascended the throne in A.D. 1704 and ruled upto 1714 A.D. He shifted the capital on the eastern bank of the river Tursha and renamed the

19. Ibid. (The pancharatnas were – Kaviratna; Sri Nath; Divja Rāmeswar; Krisna Misra; Rāmārāl), P.163.
20. Ibid.
21. KBI, P. 171; Rai Varma, P. 67
22. Ibid, P.171, Ibid. P.69

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capital as Behār (the present Koch Behār Town). He was the follower of Brahmanical Hinduism and one Shidhānta Srimoni Bhattacharya was his royal priest. However it seems that he was also a follower of liberal religious policy.

On the other hand the kings of eastern Koch Kingdom, i.e. Koch Hājo also followed the same religious policy as the socio-political stitutions of the time permits. Raghudev the first king of this line himself was Vaisnava by faith yet he reacted the religion of the masses. The influence of the Brahmanical Hinduism was still in full sway in Kāmrūpa. Hence Raghudev followed such a policy which satisfy all the section of the masses. He patronised the Brahmanical Hinduism and as well as he rebuilt the Hayagriva Mādhava temple at Hājo and the Pāndunātha temple at Guwahati and granted land and servants for their maintainence. His court was also adorned with learned scholars, who were studying the Bhāgavata Purāṇa regularly. But Parikshit Narayan was strict follower of Brahmanical Hinduism. He was a devout worshipper of Devi, and he offered full patronage to the Brahmanical Hinduism and restricted to a certain extent the activities of the Vaisnavite preachers. He even drive out the Neo-Vaisnavite preacher Dāmodaradeva from his kingdom who later taken shelter at Koch Behār. Due to the anti vaisnava attitude Madhavdeva the greatest disciple of Sankaradeva also had to left for Koch Behār. Likewise Balinarayan alias Dharmanarayan was also a devout worshipper of traditional Saiva and Sakti cult and followed the Brahmanic Hinduism. But for his subject people he followed the liberal religious attitude as because time demanded, the mass people of the valley from Eastern Assam to the further end of the Koch Behār being influenced by the Sankaradeva’s neo-Vaisnvite faith where all section of People of the society were treated (Brahmana Chandala alike) as equal and where there were no caste distinction.

From the above discussion it becomes clear, as we mentioned earlier that the kings religion is generally different in essence from the religion of masses. The religion of the ruling class is always governed by some contemporary socio-political stitations backed by political

23. Ibid, P. -189; Ibid Pp. 70-71
24. DRV. vv. 677-682; ABGB. Opclit. Prachya-Sasanavali, plate no.5;6.

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interest. Hence the Koch kings sharply reacted to the beliefs of the masses and followed a time honoured religious policy and tried to satisfy all the section of the masses offering a liberal attitudes towards their beliefs depending upon the demands of the time.

II. A Brief comparison of the religious policy of the Koch rulers with that of some of the territories of the Ahom and Bengal:

(i) Religious policy of the Ahom:

Asom, the Tai-Ahom kingdom was founded in A.D. 1228 at upper Brahmaputra Valley. It took a several centuries for its expansion and in due course of time legitimated their political authority over almost the entire Brahmaputra Valley. Throughout their process of expansion they had to attended with so many bloody warfare, from the local chiefstains and as well as the contiguous powers. But the rulers had punctured all these by the diplomacy and statemanship and by the year 1682, 24a established their sovereign authority over the whole of the valley.

For the proper understanding of the religion and religious policy of the Ahom rulers the entire period of their rule in Assam from 1228 A.D. to 1826 A.D., may be devided into three phases, viz (a) 1228-1397, a period of non intervention in others religion. (b) 1397-1687, a period of inclination towards Brahmanical Hinduism and (c) 1681-1821, a period of conflicts among different sects of Hinduism and reaction of the royal family. 25

24a. Gadadhar singha ascended the throne in A.D. 1681. By this time Gauhati was handed over to Mughal by Laluk Sola Barphukon in the hope of the throne with the help of the Mughals, as there prevailed an internal crisis for supremacy in Ahom administration. Hence on ascending the throne Gadadhar Singha set his mind to recover Gauhati from the Mughals and lost no time to send a large army for the purpose. The Assamese army captured Bāhābārī and Kajali, as well as seriously defeated the Mughal army in a navel battle at the mouth of river Barnadi. The Mughals then retreated to Itakhuli, near Sukreswar in Gauhati, where the last of a series of battles between the Assamese and the Mughals was fought which ended with a crushing defeat to Mughals. At this, the Mughal Faujader fled away and the victorious Assamese army pursued after the Mughals as far as the river Manah. Thenceforth, the river Manah remained the boundary between Mughal India and the kingdom of Assam. (Vide, ABGC, P.263) Some cannon captured during the war still preserved in the Assam state Museum, Gauhati which bear the following inscription in Sanskrit: “King Gadadhar Singha having vanquished the Mussalmans at Gauhati, obtained the weapon in 1604 saka” (1682 A.D). Vide, HAGP, P.167.

It is believed from the various sources that before the arrival of the Tāi-Āhoms in the Brahmaputra valley they had already come under the influence of Tāoism, confucianism and even Buddhism. They even came into contact with the Brahmanical Hinduism also. Hence the religion of the ancient period of the valley, the Brahmanical Hinduism was not unfamiliar to them. Being the new comer to this land the Tāi-Āhoms, in their early days devoted their attention towards the political gain, in stead of interfere in the religious rites, rituals and social customs of the local people. They neither disturbed the locals in their religious customs nor gave up their own faiths. During this period it seems that all the Āhom rulers followed a policy of Āhomising the local mongoloid tribes by means of intermingling with their customs. The founder King Sukāphā (1228-1268 A.D.) was a shrewed politician. He followed a conciliatory measures towards the conquered Morān and Barāhi tribes treating them as equal with the Āhoms. Such policy of Sukāphā was followed by his successors upto 1397 A.D. And by this policy of non-interference in respect of religious activities, the Tāi-Āhoms gained the good will of the local people, that helped a lot in expansion of their kingdom in course of time.

The period of inclination towards Hinduism began from the days of Sudāngphā (1397-1407) alias Bāmuni Konwar, who was born and brought up in a Brahman family. 26 The chronicles (Buranjis) narrate the history of Sudāngphā’s birth and his eventual accession to the throne as follows: the first queen of Tāo-khāmti when acted as regent at a time of absent of the king took the advantage to grudge with her co-wife, who was at that time an expectant mother, as a mater of fact the first queen was barren and a jealous wife. By making a charge of an alleged adultery the regent queen sentenced her co-wife to death. But the unfortunate victim was secretly spared of her life by the men who were to carry out the orders. They set her adrift on the Brahmaputra. Subsequently, she got shelter to a house of Brahmana at Hābung. The queen gave birth to male child there and died immediately after. The Brahmana brought up the child up as his own. Meanwhile Tāo-khāmti was dethroned and assassinated.

26. *ABGC*. p. 49
in 1389. As he died without leaving an heir, the ministers took charge of the kingdom, and started searching out for a prince to be the king, because according to the Ahom right of kingship, only the direct descendants of Sukāphā on the male line were eligible. However on receiving the information about the son of the deceased king born and brought up mysteriously in the Brahmana family at Hābung, the ministers sought him out and made him king. The prince took with him his Brahmana foster father who was allowed to stay with him. Sudāngphā on ascending to the throne, brought the Lakshmināśāyana Salāgrām, a Hindu god into the Palace and appointed his foster father Brahmana as his confidential adviser. By this act of Sudāngphā the Hindu god gained into importance as much as Chomdeo the Ahom titulary deity. He also introduced the Hindu practices of coronation ceremony and himself performed the same known as Singari Ghart Uthā as the coronation hall on the occasion had to be contracted with Singari wood. The ceremony was performed according to the rites of Ahom, but it is possible that his Brahmana foster father blessed him with Vedic mantras when the king assumed the high sounding Hindu Title—Rājesvra Chakravati Narapati. However, the orthodox section of the Ahoms showed their displeasure against the pro-Hindu activities of the king, but the rebellion was put to an end. Both the Hindu and Ahom practices were continued in the kingdom parallelly. Sudāngphā's successors were gradually inclined towards the Brahmanic Hinduism which got its roots to spread its culture in the Ahom Kingdom. Susengpha (1439-1488) the successor of Sundāngphā was so much inclined towards Hindu practices that he offered full patronage towards Hinduism and rebuilding a Hindu Temple at Nāga Sankara in central Assam. Probably it was done under the influence of Brahmana for extending and legitimising their rule over the newly acclaimed area. During the reign of Suhungmung (1497-1539) the western boundary of the kingdom was extended up to the river Karatoya and where a victory tower was built, on the bank of the river. According to G. Adhikary, it was probably the Hindu Pandits who encouraged the king to do so.

27. Ibid
28. CHAB. p. 226; G Adhikari, p. 32
29. CHAHB. Vol III, p. 28.
31. G Adhikary, Ibid. p. 33
vast Hindu population was thus included in his territory, and these Hindu and Hinduised people had with them both orthodox and semi-orthodox Hindu social system. The Brahmanas bestowed upon Suhungmung the Hindu title Svarganārāyana. It indicates that the Brahmanic influence was greatly increase at the time. He had also adopted the Saka era in place of the Āhom system of calculation by cycle of 60 years. At the same time, a religious embassy was deputed to the temple of Lord Jaganath in Orissa. It was during his reign that the first Buranjī in Assamese entitled, Sri Sri Swarganārāyana Mahārājār Janma Kathā was written, wherein the Āhoms were assigned the origin from the Hindu God Indra, making thereby another forward step in the process of their conversion to Hinduism. However the Āhom rulers were not blind supporter and patron of Hinduism, to grow as a danger affecting their kingdom. At the same time the period of Suhungmung and his successors witnessed the growth of Vaisnavite movement led by Sankardeva (1449-1569) a politically frustrated non-Brahman Bhuyan from present day Nawgāon district. Soon his teachings became popular among the masses which alarmed Āhom rulers. Therefore they took stern measures against this new sect of Vaisnavism and as a result of which Sankardeva and his chief disciple Mādhavdeva along with other followers had to leave the Āhom Kingdom and took shelter at Koch Kingdom. By that stern measures, the Āhom ruler overcome an impending danger from the Bhuyans and the political powers of the Bhuyans were completely crushed. Suhungmung however did not give up his own traditional customs. Nevertheless, the king continued to perform the Āhom rites. He celebrated the Rikhvan ceremony performed to obtain longevity. Suhungmung’s son and successor Suklengmung’s (1539-53) religious policy was in continuation of that of his father. He disfavoured the idea of having both Chom-Cheng (Chomdeo) and Lakshmi-Narayan deities representing two different faiths in the Palace. He therefore, installed the deity of Chom Cheng in a separate temple outside the palace but within the palace campus. This indicates the growing preponderance of Hinduism in the Āhom

32. HAG. p. 86 (This title, or its variant Svarga Dev became henceforth the designation by which the Āhom kings described themselves in their official documents.)
33. ABSMJC. Pp. 20 ff; Adhikary, ibid. p. 33
34. CHAB. p. 227.
Court. Suklengmung even used the Brahmanical Hinduism to off an attack by the Koches. A contingent of army of local tribes were sent to battle field who wore sacred threads and marched riding on cows. The Koch army who were at that time under great influence of Hinduism did not agree to kill their opponents (the go-Brahmanas) and had to retreated.\textsuperscript{36} Similar policy was followed by Susenpha (1603-41) who assumed the Hindu title Pratâp Singha. He was too much inclined towards Brahmanical Hinduism that he rebuilt several Śiva temples at Dergaon and Biswanath and introduced the annual Durgā Puja. He also appointed some learned Brahmanas to the responsible post of ambassador or Katakï (messenger), who thus got an access to conduct the diplomatic relations with the western countries.\textsuperscript{37} He even performed his mothers Srādha ceremony according to the Brahmanical form of rites and rituals. Thus by patronising Brahmanical sect of Hinduism against the neo-Vaisnavite headed by Sankardeva, Pratâp Singha checked the probable danger from the Bhuyans. However the concept of equality and fraternity in religious plane, the neo-Vaisnavite movement attracted the masses and became the dominant faith of the time. Hence the successors of Susengphā had to changed their approach. They began to show favour to the branch of this sect which had been under Brahmanical influence. Sutamlā alias Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663) wanted to propitiate the Gods by devotion to religion and to atone for his particle and was the first Ātom king to accept Hinduism formally. He took initiation from a Brahmana called Niranjan Bāpu of Āuniati Satra, a Monestory of the neo-Vaisnavites.\textsuperscript{38} He also brought one Bonamāli Gosāin from Koch Behār, being heard the fame and establihed him at Jakhalābandhā donating lands for a Satra.\textsuperscript{39} Since then upto the reign of Sulikphā alias Lorā Rājā (1679-81) took their initiation into Vaisnavism which was the predominant faith in Assam at that time.\textsuperscript{40} As a result of which all the successive Kings became disciples of Satras led by Brahmana.

\textsuperscript{36} S.K. Bhuyan (ed). \textit{Sat Sari Assom Buranji}, Guwahati. 1945. P. 22. (Even today an Assamese people while finding himself in a confusion to determine what is right and what is wrong usually refer to this situation of the Koches by saying ..tale go-badha, upare brahma badhi, meaning it is a situation having no options to do either or.)
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{ABSMJC}, p. 39; P. Gogoi. P. 384
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{HAG}, p. 140
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{40} N.N. Vasu.. P. 225
The last phase of the religious policy of the Āhom ruler begins with the ascendancy of Supāṭphā alias Gadādhār Singha (1681–98) which reached at a culminating point. The experience he gathered during the period of his exile before ascending the throne, Godādhār Singha could see the impending danger of the kingdom from the neo-Vaisnāvite Satras mostly headed by Brahmana preceptors. The Satrādhikārs used to live like kings with all sorts of paraphernalia. The state economy was at a stake when the followers of this sect called Bhākatas claimed exemption from the liability to serve the state as pāik. Hence Godādhār Singha considered Vaisnāvism to be too passive and mild for a ruling class, required to maintain their domination by force of arms. He disfavoured the growing wealth, grandeur, and influence of the Vaisnava pontiffs, who, he thought were potential sources of danger to monarchy. He therefore initiated plundering of Vaisnava monasteries and killing or expelling of their heads. On the contrary he followed a policy to leaning towards Saktism and taken measures to renovate the age old Hindu temples which has been neglected for centuries. He therefore re-constructed the Umānanda temple at Gauhati, with and intention to legitimise the Āhom authority in Kāmrūp.

Godādhār Singha’s son and successor Rudra Singha (1696–1714) was tolerant. He made a survey of the Satras and the ancient sacred sites of the Hindus. And immediately after assuming the powers he began to reverse his father’s policy in regard of Vaisnava Gosāins. He appears to be extremely shrewed in healing the wounded sentiment of the Hindu religious heads for he suspended the atrocities upon the Vaisnavas on one hand and continued to make extensive patronage to Hindu temples where Brahmanas were assigned lands and men. As well as he also patronised Islam and sent regular offerings to Muslim sacred site at Poā-meccā at Hājo. Rudra Singha became an open supporter of the Sākta faith towards the end of this rule. His Hindu proclivities increased as he grew older and at last formally embraced that religion and became orthodox Hindu. This involved the ceremony Known as ‘taking the Sarana’. Since his death onwards, the Sākta faith became the creed of the Āhom

42. Ibid, pp. 116 ff.
43. HAG, pp. 168ff.
soverigns and their principal officers and nobles. His son and successor Śiva Singha (1714-1744) alias Sutānphā, was a staunch Sākta. He was completely under the influence of Brahmāna priest and astrologers. He made many lavish presents for the support of temples and Brahmans. One learned Brahmā priest Krisnārām Bhattacharya from Bengal was appointed as head of the management of the Kāmākhyā temple at Gauhati who was also codified the rites and rituals of the Hindus and traced out a procedure of worship acceptable to all Hindus of Assam. Śiva Singha let loose a policy of assault on the Vaisnavas to the extent that the Vaisnavas were openly insulted by his Queen. A section of Vaisnavas called Moāmoriā could not tolerate this type of insult and atrocity for which they rose in an armed revolt against the Āhom authority. As a result the unchallenged power of the Valley the Āhom Kingdom, led to the way of decline.

From the above discussion, it appears that the Tāi-Āhom rulers were never serious in respect of rites, rituals and procedure of worship, but very cautiously and carefully tried to utilise religion and religious sentiments in extending and legitimising their political authority over the Brahmaputra Valley. They often carefully tried to use the different sects of Hinduism against each other. But eventually the very policy led the kingdom to its own destiny. Catholic in their social and religious outlook, the Āhoms were extremely tolerant of the views of others. Even after the adoption of Hinduism the Āhoms did not completely give up their religion and customs. Every king used to assume two names on ascending the throne, one is Assamese Hindu form and other is Āhom. Since the death of Rājeswar Singha, the funeral ceremonies of the Āhom monarchs were performed according to both Brahmanical and Āhom codes.

(ii) Religious policy of the Rulers of contemporary Bengal:

The policy of the rulers of contemporary Bengal during our period of study was under the domination of the Mahammadan rulers. However Bengal came under the Mahammadan domination since long time back. One Sher Khān Sūr (A.D. 1540-1545) the
founder of Sūr dynasty was the contemporary to the Koch King Naranarayan, who by defeating Ghiasuddin Mahmmd (A.D. 1533-1538) the last ruler of the Hussain Shāhi dynasty in A.D. 1538, established his hold over Bengal. Within a short time Sher Khān Sūr became the challenging power to the Mughals of Delhi. He by defeating Humāyun the Mughal ruler of Delhi in the battle of Chausā in 1539 A.D. and Kanauj in 1540 A.D. occupied Delhi and consolidate his hold over Delhi to Bengal. However Humayun reestablished himself on the throne of Delhi in A.D. 1545. He was succeeded by his son Ṭakbar (A.D. 1556-1605), who placed the Mughal power beyond challenge by defeating Hemo the general of Mahmmd Shāh Ādil at the battle of Pānipath in 1556 A.D. In the meantime the Bengal Sultan Sulaimān Kārnānī, the shrewed politician followed a peaceful policy towards Ṭakbar and appeared his viceroy on the western border of the Bengal with a rich presents.46 But after his death during the reign of Dāud Khān Kārnānī (1572-74 A.D.) relation with Ṭakbar became hostile and as a result Ṭakbar occupied Bengal by defeating him and made the Bengal as a permanent province of the Mughal empire in 1576.47 The occupation of Bengal by the Mughals touched the western boundary of the Koch Behār and subsequently the direct relations between the two became open.

In the matters of religion and social institutions which were the most important aspects of the life in pre-colonial India, both Hindus and Muslims were poles apart. In the religious matters they differed fundamentally in their theological conception, method of worship and everything connected with daily devotion to God. To the Hindus, images and temples were the most sacred objects, but both of these were anathema to the Muslims. Their philosophical notions and sacred literature, their conception of heaven and hell, of this life and the next in short the whole outlook on men and things lacked a common basis. Similarly they differed widely between their social rules and regulations. The ideal of brotherhood of Islam and of theological equality among its adherents, was in strange contrast to the caste system and untouchability of the Hindus. Restriction on inter-marriages, inter-dinning and remarriage of

46.  History of Bengal. vol. II, P. 179
47.  Akbarnāmah III. Pp. 254f.

(121)
widows among Hindus was repugnant to Islam’s teachings which permitted divorce, remarriage of females and almost free marriages with a few restrictions. They also differed in the laws of succession, disposal of dead, their dress, modes of eating and greeting. Throughout the pre-colonial ages, therefore, the problem was how these two systems each with their own strong roots could develop a healthy relationship. For a long time the struggle for supremacy went on. On the one hand there was the influence of Islam and the philosophy of life represented by it. On the other hand there was a pervasive influence of Hindu culture and civilization. 

There was a general tendency towards aloofness on the part of Hindus during the Sultanate period (1206-1526). In spite of the earlier isolated efforts of some of the saints of the Bhakti movement such as Ramānanda (16th cent.); Vallabhacharya (15th cent.) and Chaitanya (16th cent.)—under the Mughals, Hindus and Muslims came nearer together and learnt to appreciate each other’s good points in the congenial atmosphere established by the wise and liberal administration of Akbar. His policy to make the court an emblem of all that was best in Hinduism and Islam gave birth to national literature, architecture, music and painting which become the common heritage of all the people living in the country. The two communities influenced each other in the field of ideas, in the ceremonies of marriage and in the manners of the court. The process of borrowing each others cultures went on under the Indian sun. In consequence great homogeneity is visible in the realm of art, such as architecture, music and painting and economic forces hammered out a common pattern, but the social customs and personal laws still continued, in various degrees, to be influenced by the religious creeds. However the mutual influences in customs and manners, ceremonies, festivals, dress, diet, sports and game etc. were mostly confined to upper and middle classes, but the masses continued to follow the traditional Hindu Path.

49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
The early Delhi Sultans tended to rule as foreigners over a subjugated Indian population, but the Mughals with Akbar, sought to knit north India’s many religious and ethnic, communities into a single political system. This policy, which crystallised around 1580 in the wake of the emperor’s abortive express in posing as king of Islam, inclined the court to an extraordinarily accommodating.51 Despite the extraordinary ways in which imperial culture had accommodated itself to north India, with respect to distant Bengal, isolated for centuries from the north, the Mughals saw themselves as distinctly alien. The Mughals feeling of alienation from the land was accompanied by a sense of superiority to or condescension towards its people.

As regard their religious culture, Bengal’s Mughal ashraf (Muslim Elite) were distinctive in at least three respects — (i) their special link with the pan-Indian Chisthi order (ii) their conceptual separation of religion and state (iii) and as a corollary to this their distinct to convert Bengalis to Islam. Since the Tughlaq period, the Chisthi order of Sufism had enjoyed a special status among Delhi rulers, who lavishly patronised the descendants of great chisthi Shaikhs with magnificent tombs and considerable tax-free land. Mirza-Nathān counted himself a faithful disciple of Shaikh Farid, perhaps because his ancestors had come from the Punjab, where the cult of that saint enjoyed special prominence.52 And Governor Islam Khan, the man most responsible for consolidating Mughal rule in Bengal was the grandson of Akbar’s chief spiritual guide, Shaikh Salim Chisthi.53

The extent to which Sufi piety was integrated with the imperial vocation is aptly illustrated in vignettes from the career of Mirza Nathān.54 It would seem, that Sufism or more precisely the style of piety informed by institutionalised world rejection and the cult of saints was very much built into the ethos of Mughal service in Bengal. In Mughal Bengal the activities of the soldier administrator and the world renouncing mystic/ascetic were similarly integrated.

52. Baharistan, Vol. II. P. 716
53. Ibid, P. 789
54. For detail, see Baharistan. Vol. I, Pp. 150-154
Tamed through routinised saint cults and the closed historical ties between the Chisthi order and the Mughal ruling house and before that the Sultans of Pandua and Gaur, sufism’s world renouncing vision formed.

Secondly, the ruling class in Bengal maintained a clear separation between matters of religion and the matters of state. As the provincial capital and administrative centre, Dhākā was devoted to the secular concerns of revenue collection, politics, and military reviews. Even its most imposing masques, such as the Satgumbad mosque (1664-76) bear the stuccoed stamp of their north Indian patrons and seem intended at least as much to display imperial power as to inspire piety. The city was devoted to trade and money making.55 But by contrast the ancient capitals of Pandua and Gaur were denied any political significance under Mughals and instead as Islamic sacred centres. The third features of Mughal āshraf’s religious sentiment was a hands off policy towards non Muslim religions. They never tried to convert the non-Muslims to Islam as a part of their assimilation into ruling class. In Bengal, salt was the imperial symbol, not Islam that conferred corporate identity on the officer corps. Moreover, bonds of loyalty among Mughal officers not only ran across community lines but persisted over several generations. When Mirzā Nathān donned the garb of the Sufi by way of lodging a personal protest against Governor Islam Khān, several Hindu officers obstinately stood by Nathān and even suffered imprisonment and flagging for showing their loyalty to him.56 It is seen that the members of the imperial corps while making vows or swearing oaths appealed to different deities according to the officer’s particular religious identities. One occasion, a copy of the Quran and a black geode representing a form of Visnu, (Śālāgrām) were brought to a mixed group of Mughal officers who had resolved to swear on oath among themselves. Placing their hands on the Qurān, the Muslim officers took solemn oath in the name of Āllāh, while the Hindu officers, placing heir hands on the geode, did the same in the name of Visnu.57 Clearly unlike the early Sultans of Bengal, Mughal officers did not perceive Islam as the

57.  Ibid., Vol. II, Pp. 476-77
state religion. Except for a brief episode of Hindu persecution in the early 1680s—which in any event had been initiated in Delhi and not Dhaka.58 Bengal’s rulers, despite pressure from local mullās and sufi’s to support Islam against other religions, maintained a strictly non-interventionist position in religious matters. A corollary of this policy was the refusal to promote the conversion of Bengalis to Islam. Indeed, given the Mughals negative sentiments towards Bengal’s natives, one should hardly expect otherwise. For Muslims in the imperial elite, their religion and their family and political contexts with north India served, in their own mind at least to distinguish them from the delta’s indigenous people, Islam Khan is known to have discouraged the conversion of Bengalis, and one occasion he actually punished one of his officers for bringing about the conversion of a Bengali Hindu.59 Moreover, it was not only Islam Khan who opposed the conversion, but also the other officers of the state, suggesting that this non-interventionist policy was a general one.

The region of West Bengal (the state of present day India) was also a part of greater Bengal at the advent of the Mughal rule, in where the Hindu civilization was deeply established. This is seen in the appearance of dated brick temples patronised by the Hindu Zamindars and dedicated to Brahmanical deities. Such temples began appearing concurrently with the rise of Mughal power and proliferated throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Most were dedicated to one of the incarnations of Visnu, especially Krsna, until the 18th century, when temples dedicated to Śiva or the Goddess began to predominate.60 The geographical distribution of these temples moreover, shows, a clear concentration in the delta’s western and especially south western sections. Of the total 230, surviving temples built between 1570 and 1760, over half are located in Hoogly, Burdwan and Bankura districts and over a quarter in Jessore, Howrah, Midnapur and Birbhum districts. By contrast, in East Bengal only one temple of this period has survived in each of Bogra, Dhaka and Bakarganj districts and none at all in

59. Baharistan. vol. I, P. 32
Chitagong, Noakholi, Comilla, Faridpur, Rajshahi, Mymensing and Sylhet districts.\(^6\) As measured by temples construction, then in the Mughal period, patronage of Hindu institutions decidedly weakened as one moved from west to east.

The greater extent to which Brahmanical culture had penetrated the west is also seen in the elaborated caste system there. Towards the end of sixteenth century, the society dominated at its upper end by Brahmanas and Kāyasthas who controlled the regions ritual and landholding functions respectively, followed by a large class of cultivators and artisan castes each endogamous and each ranked according to as graded hierarchy. These were followed by the lower castes of fishermen and boatmen and finally by untouchables.\(^6\) The latter were mainly devotees of Goddess in her various manifestations, folk deities whose wrath and volatility required appeasement by blood sacrifice.\(^6\) In the Mughal period, west Bengal’s middle castes of cultivators and artisans were mainly Vaisnava, devotees of Kṛśna and it was owing mainly to their support and patronage of Vaisnava zamindars that the region’s Vaisnava temples proliferated in the seventeenth century. For their part West Bengal’s higher caste Brahmanas and Kāyasthas were primarily devoted to Śiva, though many had become Vaisnava with the growth in popularity of the Kṛśna cult among their cultivating and artisan clients.\(^6\) In short west Bengal presented a stable agrarian society whose constituent strata were, relative to other parts of the delta, well advanced in their religious and social integration with the hierarchical values of Brahmanical Hinduism.

There is also evidence of pockets of north Indian Muslims settling in the west but their social impact appears to have been negligible. Hence the local population neither resisted Mughal authority nor adopted the religious ideology of the dominant section of the new ruling class, Islam.

\(^6\) George Michell (ed), Brick temples of Bengal. 1983, PP. 195-254. (The distribution is as follows - Hoogly - 49; Burdwan - 43; Bankura - 35; Jessore - 18; Howrah - 16; Midnapur - 17; Birbhum - 12; Twenty four Paragana - 8; Murshidabad - 5; Nadia - 6; Pabna - 4; Khulna - 4; Dinajpur - 4; Rangpur - 3; Purulia - 2; Kushtia - 1; Bakarganj - 1; Bogra - 1; Dhaka - 1)


From the discussion made above, it appears that the Mughal government in Bengal was simply not interested in imposing or advancing religious causes, either in its official pronouncements or what is more important in the way provincial commanders or local district officials implemented official policy. Ultimately the Mughals had conquered Bengal in order to augment the wealth of the empire and not for the glory of the Islam. And they understood that the application of social justice was a more practical means to achieving this end than was religious bigotry. This in any case was the policy that followed even to the Shiqdar (district Officer) level. The Shiqdars clearly ruled on the principle, that if the districts predominantly Hindu populated then they judged according to their own customs and not by Islamic or any other law. Nor were Muslims to be judged differently from Hindus when it came to breaching local customs informed in any case by Hindu sentiment. Thus it was the nature of the Mughal’s religious policy to allow non-Muslims to live under their own laws and customs.

A brief comparison of the religious policy among the three states:

Now from the above discussion it appears that the rulers of the three territories followed almost a similar policy. For instance the Koch ruler like Naranarayan was a Sākta so far his personal inclination and simultaneously he earned his good name and fame as one of the greatest patron of Vaisnavism. At the same time he also did not disrespect the traditional rites, rituals and customs for he allowed the inhabitants of the northern bank of Brahmaputra to worship their deities with wine and flesh.

Likewise most of the Āhom kings also followed a liberal policy. Although during the reign of Gadādhar Singha, Śīva Singha and Gaurināth Singha some atrocities was made upon a section of Vaisnavas, yet they should not be blamed as an enemy of Vaisnavism. Śīva Singha and Gaurināth Singha also donated land and men to a number of Vaisnava establishments and preachers. King Rudra Singha and Kamaleswar Singha extended royal patronage to the Muslim shrins including that of Poămaccā.

65. Prachya-Sasanavali, Plate, no; Śivasingha- 18; 31;37;45;129..... ; Gaurinathsingha,- 86; 90....
66. GAdhikary, P.35.
So far the religious policy of the rulers of Bengal is concerned, it is seen that they also did not differ more from the policy of the Koches and the Mughals. Some rulers under the direction from the Delhi Masnad had to behave with the non-muslim with a tough hand and red eye. Yet most of them were tolerant to the subjects followed a different faith. We have come across a document which shows that even Emperor Aurangazeb who imposed jījīyā tax on Hindus, donated certain area of land for the maintenance of the “holy low and high hill” of the Umānanda temple situated in the midst of the Brahmaputra at Guwahati.67

Thus it is seen that the rulers of the Koch kingdom, of the Ahom territories and of Bengal left their subjects at their liberty in case of their personal religion and usually did not interfere into it. They followed a Religious Policy of non-interference and left no stone unturned to use this policy to gain the support and loyalty of the subjects on the one hand and to legitimise the ruler’s authority upon the entire area of their territories.