CHAPTER 5

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY
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Every element of human culture is subjected to change which may be a cultural change or social change. Religion is a part of culture that synthesizes the divine feeling with materialistic sentiments of daily life. In religion somehow attempts are made to build a relation between human beings and the Absolute being. Cultural assimilation as well as long gap from the early periods to the present era etc. are the building blocks of change in any religious tradition. It is a fact that many of the religions of the world developed either as a direct result of influences from different religions, or in reaction to such influences. So far as the Tai Ahom religion is concerned it is based on the ancient religion of Tais of Moung Mao, the present Yunnan province of China. The Tais have brought their religion to this part of the country i.e., Assam with their advent under the leadership of Tai Prince Siu Ka Pha at the early part of 13th Century A.D. The religion of the Tais is based primarily on the cult of ancestor worship. Since they settled their capital at Charaideu, they took Charaideu as a sacred place and began to worship their own gods there by constructing Deosals. Like all other religions, the Tai Ahom religion also has undergone changes. Yet it has continued practicing its old religious tradition along with the changes that occurred to it.

The liberal attitudes of the Tai Prince paved the way to assimilate the worship of local gods and goddesses along with the worship of gods of Tai Ahom pantheon. Earlier, Charaideu was the place of worship of the two local indigenous communities – the Barahis and Morans, later on it became the scared place of Tai Ahoms as sponsored by the Ahom kings (Swarga Deu). The local gods are also worshipped by the Tai Ahom kings. Through this process, the worship of local gods entered in to the religion of the Tai Ahoms. Another process is through marriage with the local girls, specially the Moran and Borahi girls. Siu Ka Pha himself married Moran Borahi girls and embraced them into his own community giving them honourable status (Nath 2006:179). Moran and Borahis were the first tribes whom Siu Ka Pha had to encounter during his advent and the daughters of the chieftains are married to the royal families and Ahom nobles.
The priestly clans who were also the companions of the Tai prince Siu Ka Pha, brought with them their religious scriptures, scripts and their religious customs and behaviour. They remained uninfluenced by the local religions, they performed various religious practices of their own tradition. Earlier the three priestly clans were included in the seven clans of *Ahom*. The seven houses of *Ahom* are — *Mohan* (*Mo'hung*), *Deodhai* (*Changbun*), *Baitung* (*Mo'Plong*), *Buragohain* (*Chao Phra mung/Thao mungklingl ungmangrai*), *Borgohain* (*Chao thao lung/Thaomung kanong*) (Barbarua 1981:23-25), *Chum Chiring and Rajkonwar* (*Khun Chao*). They are the seven original clans of the *Tai Ahoms*.

The *Ahom* Kings were not converted to Hinduism rather they keep sponsoring all the sects of Hinduism till the reign of Siva Singha. The *Tai Ahom* religion is influenced by Hinduism during the reign of Siu Dang Pha alias Bamuni Konwar (Brahmin Prince 1398-1407) as he was born and brought up in a Brahmin family. He was called Bamuni Konwar as he was looked after by them, he brought the Brahmin family and patronized them (Barua 1985:49). He was the first *Ahom* king to have adopted the coronation rites by ascending the Singarighar. The later kings Siuhum Mung alias Dihingia Raja (1497-1539), Siu Cheng Pha alias Pratap Simha (1603-1641) (who was said to have been under the grip off an evil Spirit and he got rid off this by performing some Brahmanical rites), Siu tam la alias Jayadhvaj Simha (1648-1663) patronized the Hindu religion at large (Bhuyan 1949:18). Siu tam la was the first in the dynasty to receive initiation (*Saran* with all formality) from a *Vaisnava* abbot named Niranjan Bapu in the year 1654 A.D., who was the first *Satradhikar* of the *Auniati Satra* (*Vaisnava* monastery) in Majuli in the district of Sivasagar and the king granted land and *paikes* for the maintenance of the *Satra* (Gogoi 1976:17). During the reign of Siu pat pha alias Gadadhar Simha (1681-1696), *Sakta* influence has grown (Baruah 1993:30). Siu Khrung Pha alias Rudra Simha (1696-1714) brought Krishnaram Bhattacharyya *Nyaya-Vagish or Parvatia Gosain* from Simalagram, Bengal and established him at *Kamakhya* temple on the Nilachal Hill (1976:18). Siu Tan Pha alias Siva Simha (1714-1744) was completely under the influence of *Brahman* priests and astrologers; and in 1722 he was so alarmed by their prediction that his rule would shortly come to an end, that he not only made many and lavish presents for support of temples and of *Brahmanas*, in the hope of conciliating the
gods and averting the threatened calamity, and became a Sakta Monarch, and his queen from a lower nat family Phuleswari who assumed the name Pramateswari (one of the names of Durga) was made the Chief King (Bor Roja) and made over to her the royal umbrella, the Ahom emblem of sovereignty and caused coins to be struck jointly in her name and his (Gait 1992:173). Phuleswari was more under the influence of the Brahmin Parvatiya Gosain. It is believed that being instigated by this Gosain, she attempted to make Saktism the state religion (Baruah 1993:9), along with this she ordered the Vaisnava Gosains to worship the goddess Durga and forbade the worship of other deities. Thus Saktism has been introduced in to the religion of the Ahoms by the Ahom Monarchs with the help of images of the Bhagavati and Salegrama stone (Bhuyan 1990:41). Phuleswari excavated the Gaurisagar tank and three temples were built on its bank dedicated to Siva, Visnu and Devi in the district of Sivasagar. Later on, after the death of Phuleswari, the queen Ambika of King Siva Simha excavated the Sivasagar tank in Sivasagar District and on its bank three temples were built and were dedicated to Siva, Visnu, and Devi. The Siva Dol or temple is famous for its height and the golden dome at its pinnacle. Thus the three sects of Hinduism, namely Saivism, Vaisnavism and Saktism got a platform to grow up here. Generally Saivism is the sect of Hinduism that takes Siva as the supreme deity. In Vaisnavism Vishnu is the supreme deity and in Saktism Sakti is worshipped which is a female part of supreme deity Siva. The Kamakhya temple of Assam is the sacred shrine of the Saktas. The Ahom kings often made gifts to this temple during their reign and even today people from various parts of the country and abroad come to visit this temple.

During the reign of Jayadhvaj Simha (1648-1663) Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garmur and Kuruabahi Satras are established with Royal patronage (Gogoi 1976:21). As the Brahmanical cult was caste oriented, and class dominated it became the source of social inequalities; the emergence of the neo-vaishnave movement launched by Sankardeva (1449-1568) preached the most simple but a very ingenuous means of Bhakti Cult which was a casteless theme. It attracted the general population against the prevalent Brahmanic Hindu Culture (Buragohain 1994:66). The advent of Sankardeva in Assam in the 16th century is usually taken as a turning point in the religious history of Assam. Prior to his time Sakta practices were prevalent in many areas, and Siva, Durga and Kali were the dominant deities. Blood sacrifices and idol
worship were in vogue and the Brahmin priest had complete authority in religious practices (Thomson 1948:42). During the reign of Siu Hung Mung (1497-1539) in the 15th and 16th century A.D. Srimanta Sankara Deva flourished and formulated Vaisnavism in a very popular way of Saran as:

‘Namat Saran
Deot Saran
Gurut Saran
Bhaktat Saran’

He preached the creed of Ek Saran, that is, surrender to God alone. Sankardeva’s teachings were based on the Bhagawat Purana and the Gita. The other disciples of Sankardeva, Madhavdev and Damodorev also led the Vaisnavite movement and religious transformation among the culturally backward common people in the plains of Assam and introduced social refinements into the social habits of these people. Sankardeva combined diverse elements of culture, indigenous and foreign, in dress, tune, instrumental music, art and dance into as attractive local pattern to serve as a medium for congregational prayer to God. He made the pleasure of culture an adjunct to religion (Gogoi 1976:20). Vaisnavite Satras and Namghar (temple) influenced both the local and Ahom people a lot and gradually the Ahom Monarchs as well the subject came under the influence of Hinduism. The ‘satra culture’ of Assam is a peculiar development of Hinduism (Vaisnavism) as it has not been based on Aryan casteism i.e. four castes – (1) Brahmin (2) khyatriya (3) Vaisya (4) Sudra, rather it is based on four cults or samhati i.e. Brahma samhati, Purusa Samhati, Nika Samhati and Kala Samhati. It should be noted here that the very theme of present Satra culture is based on the ancient Tai cum Buddhist socio religious culture. The Vaisnavite ‘Nam ghar’ is very much identical to the Buddha bihar.

This is provided by the fact that the Ahom rulers entreated all the different religious sects equally such as the Sakta, Vaishnava, Brahmins and even the Muslim pirs (Buragohain 1994:66). They also entertained Muslim pirs in their court and sent them to pray for their welfare at the principal Muslim shrine at Poa-Mecca hill in Hajo. Muslim pirs (saints) were also endowed with land grants or Pirpal grants (Baruah 1993:30). Shah Milan propagated Islamic faith in the reign of Pratap Simha.
Shah Milan, a Muslim *pir* in the later part of Pratap Singha's rule freely propagated the Islamic faith in Assam, and obtained assistance from the government officers (Sarma 1986:309). Yet, as pointed out by Sir Edward Gait, 'Hinduism became the predominant religion and the *Ahoms*, who persisted in holding to their old beliefs and tribal customs were regarded as a separate and degraded class' (Gogoi 1976:40). The *Tai Ahoms* have their own burial system rather than burning the dead. Yet Siurem Pha alias Rajeswar Simha's (1751-1769 A.D.) dead body was burnt (Gait 1926:189 & Barua 1985:292) and undoubtedly this burning system of the dead body is an influence of Hinduism.

As a result of the influence of Hinduism over the *Tai Ahom* Monarchs and their subjects whether in a form of Saktism, Saivism and Vaisnavism, they accepted and began to perform the Hindu rites and ceremonies as a cultural and religious assimilation except the three priestly clans who are the custodians of the *Tai Ahom* religion from the very beginning till today. They never accepted the Sanskritisation and the transformation of the traditional religious rites and ceremonies and still are continuing their religious rites and practices as led down in the religious scriptures written in *Tai* language. The *Ahom* priests refrained from taking part in such worships (Gait 1926:194) of other religions.

Again another indirect factor of the influence of Hinduism over the *Tai-Ahom* religion is the British Colonial system that tended to promote Hinduism in Assam and in doing so had a restrictive role in the evolution of *Ahom* culture. The British took their power from the *Chao Pha (Ahom King)*, so they considered it normal to replace the traditional religion of the *Ahom* by another, i.e., Hinduism, finally Hinduism, before and during the British Colonial rule, weakened *Ahom* religion (Berlie 2000:217-218). Thus the British Colonial system tended to promote Hinduism in Assam without recognizing the separate existence of the *Ahom* religion. The British arrested the power of ruling Assam; and recognized Hinduism as the traditional religion of the Assamese including *Ahoms*. Gradual assimilation caused the whole *Ahom* Kingdom to be a Hindu state. Even in the time of crisis the priestly clans (*Deodhai, Mohan, Bailung*) never abandoned their own rituals and their own *Tai* language and script.
The priestly clans are practicing their own religious rites and ceremonies in full vigour. However due to the influence of Hinduism they had to perform some Hindu ceremonies like Hubochani, Sara Utua or Sara dia, Ho-Sang-Khora or Lakhimi Puja, Gatial Puja etc. in Tai Ahom style. Hence, in these worships the mantras are chanted by the priests both in Tai Ahom language as well as in Assamese. These rituals are performed as a part of their assimilation with as well as due to the influence of local tribes and Hinduism. Already it is said that the priests prepare nga pulok (a mixture of milk, curd, sugar, honey, butter) and distribute to eat as a part of the ceremony. This mixture is commonly known as panchamrita in Hindu religion. Here it appears that the whole system of preparation and distribution of nga pulok has a Hindu influence. The very basis of the belief that it has Hindu influence is due to the fact that the Tais usually never take cow milk, because to them milk is for the calf only.

According to some scholars, some sort of influence of Confucianism is visible in the Tai Ahom religion. Confucianism and Taoism were the contemporary religions of China till 1st Century A.D. while Buddhism entered into their religious system. And only at the early part of 13th Century a Tai Mao group (later known as the Tai Ahom) came to Assam. Hence, it is believed by some scholars that the Tai Ahom religion is influenced by these three religions. The Pi nong bond (Elder-brother Younger-brother) or senior junior relation of the Tai Ahoms is a visible influence of Confucianism. Confucianism got its name from Kung-fu-Tzu or its Latinized name Confucius. It is basically an ethico-religious system where religious, ethical, social as well as political ideals latent. Confucius was more concerned with the moral problems of day to day living along with this he believed in ‘Tsien’ or ‘Heaven’ (Shang Ti) as the impersonal form of the Supreme Deity and also believed in the efficacy of ancestor worship. But ancestor worship was not for any religious reason but as a form of nourishing the affectionate memory of the departed parents and parents’ parents and as a way of keeping good family traditions and examples for the living children and childrens’ children (Radhakrishnan 1952:558). The virtues preached by Confucius were, Jen or ren which is a slippery concept that is very difficult to translate into other languages. The most common English translation of it is ‘humanity’; but other terms such as ‘human-heartedness’, and ‘compassion’ have
been used (Hawkings 2004:212). According to Confucius, the essence of this virtue was that you should not do to others what you did not want done to yourself. The following virtues are taught by Confucius:

_Shu_ - _Shu_ means reciprocity.

_Zhong_ (_Cheng_) - loyalty to oneself and one's superiors.

_Zhi_ (_Chih_) - _Zhi_ means wisdom. For Confucius, wisdom meant not only the command of facts and intellectual knowledge but rather an understanding of human nature. And only through a deep knowledge of human nature, garnered painfully over many years, called the gentleman be wise.

_Yong_ (_Yung_) - _Yong_ means courage. The gentleman must possess courage. And a (jen) benevolent man is sure to possess courage.

_Xin_ (_hsin_) - _Xin_ means trustworthiness. _Xin_ was the virtue of keeping one's word, of doing what one had undertaken to do.

_Jing_ (_Ching_) - _Jing_ means reverence or awe, that feeling of tremendous importance of gravity that some people or situations engender for Confucius such emotions were associated with the awareness of the immensity of one's responsibilities toward both one's ancestors and promoting the welfare of the common people.

_Xiao_ (_hsino_) - _Xiao_ means filiality or filial piety. _Xiao_ was to show one's parents and by extension one's ancestors, the devotion and obedience that both the seniority and position in the family deserved.

The above virtues of _ren_, _shu_, _Thong_, _Zhi_, _Yong_, _Xin_, _Jing_ and _Xino_ were all developed within the framework of the five Confucian relationships, which in turn defined the concept of 'Yi' or duty. These relationships were those between parent and child, between older and younger siblings, between husband and wife, between ruler and subject, and between friends. For Confucius it followed naturally that if certain people were good and obedient children, then they must inevitably be good subjects to their ruler, good husbands or wives, and loyal friends. Confucius maintained that it was not enough for a man simply to be called a father and receive the respect due to that position but he must actually perform his function as a father. This view led to the concept of 'Cheng ming' or the rectification of names. Again, in Confucian thought
‘Li’ or ritual plays an important role because it can promote social cohesion and individual morality. Again communal rituals gave people a sense of continuity with the past, a common focus in the present, and a sense of group goals for the future welfare. The fundamental organic relationship in Confucius’ thought was that between parent and child (Hawkins 2004:214). And perhaps the link between parent and child from the very early period was emphasized by the cult of ancestor worship observed by their children and grand children. This cult of ancestor worship has been borrowed by Confucius from the ancient religion of China the great books of Confucianism were the witness of it. The Pi nong bond (Elder-brother Younger-brother) or senior junior relation of the Tai Ahoms is a visible influence of Confucianism. Among the cultural traits, Berlie mentions familial attitude and the enduring Pi nong system that is prevalent universally among the Tai. According to the Pi nong system emphasis is laid on masculine side and the duties of children to parents and of wife to husband. This Pi nong system means elder brother – younger brother, is one of the basic relationships in the Tai families; brothers of the same blood always recognize the elder as superior to the younger in the successive generations. This is one of the basic cultural traits that have not undergone change throughout history (Phukan 2009:12-13) and even today the Tai Ahoms have maintained this custom.

Again according to some scholars the influence of Tao religious thought is also discernible in the Ahom religion, particularly the concept of the duality of reality. In Taoism it is believed that the imperceptible Tao shapes the universe continuously out of primordial chaos; the perpetual transformation of the universe by the alternations of Yin and Yang, or complementary energies, is nothing but the external aspect of the same Tao (Encyclopaedia Britannica vol.-17, 1768:1035). Yin and Yang are stated as two complementary, interdependent principles or phases alternating in space and time; they are emblems evoking the harmonious interplay of all pairs of opposites in the universe. The Taoist treatise ‘Huai-nan-tzu’ describes how the one ‘Primordial Breath’ (Yuan ch’i) split into the light ethereal Yang Breath, which formed heaven; and the heavier, cruder Yin breath, which formed Earth. The diversifications and interactions of Yin and Yang produced the Ten Thousand Beings. Every man has a portion of this primordial life force allotted to him at birth, and his
task is not to dissipate it through the activity of his senses but to strengthen, control, and increase it in order to live out his full span of life (Encyclopaedia Britannica vol. 17, 1768:1038). Here it is also believed that the union of spiritual (hun) and vegetative (p'o) souls means life and the dispersion of which spells death. To retain and harmonize one’s souls is important for physical life as well as for the unification of the whole human entity. The similar view is also present in Tai Ahom religion that the human being is made of two entities, namely p'o and phu, one is spiritual, the primordial breath and the other is material. In death the spiritual element is believed to have gone for heaven and the other will remain in earth as it came from earthly matters. Some scholars maintain that this is an influence of Taoism over Tai Ahom religion.

The concept of ‘Tao’ as ‘Way’ or ‘heavens way’ etc. is not distinctly found in the Tai Ahom religion. Yet the Tao is present here but not in the sense of Taoism as propounded by Lao Tzu. The concept of ‘tien’ or Moung-phi (heaven) is present in the Tai Ahom religion and the concept of tien tsu or son of heaven is present in it. In the Tai Ahom religion the kings are regarded as the son of heaven or god as they are the heaven born people. The first Tai princes Khun Lung and Khun Lai were the grand sons of the Lord of heaven, Lengdon and they were the fore fathers of Chao lung Siu Ka Pha the first Tai Ahom king. And thus the Tai Ahoms ascribe their kings as heaven descent. It is clear that Tai Ahom religion is neither a form of Taoism nor Confucianism but it is very much similar to those. Like Taoism and Confucianism in Tai-Ahom religion also ancestor worship is strongly found. The basis of this ancestor worship is the respect towards parent gods. Like Confucianism the Ahom religion also believes in performing of rituals. These are the propitiations to gods and remembrance of the ancestors.

Again few influences of Buddhism are also seen in the Tai Ahom religion. Although there is a lack of general agreement regarding the influences, yet it is a fact that in Tai Ahom religion Buddhist elements (the non sacrificial approach in Chak lang, Phura Lung religious ceremony etc.) as well as Taoist elements (duality of soul- yin and yang) are found. Though some Buddhist elements are present yet it cannot be said that the Tai Ahom religion is Buddhism particularly Mahayana Buddhism or Taoism. The followers of Phralung Buddhism claim that the religion of the Tai
Ahoms is the Phralung Buddhism, which is a Vajrayana sect of Mahayana Buddhism. In this connection they also claim that the royal deity of the Tai Ahom kings is nothing but Lord Buddha. The image of the royal deity Chum Pha Rung Seng Moung is actually a golden image of Lord Buddha called Vajra Dhyani Buddha because of handling vajra in the hand.

The term Vajra denoted the thunderbolt, a legendary weapon and divine attribute that were made from an adamantine, or indestructible, substance and which could therefore pierce and penetrate any obstacle or obfuscation. The Vajrayana got its name from Sanskrit word Vajra, which symbolizes the thunderbolt of the god of weather and war, Indra. It also refers to ‘diamond’ symbolizing the unbreakable strength. Thus this is also called Diamond Vehicle. This is one of the schools of Buddhist thought which was first practised in India and from here this school spread to Tibet, Bhutan and Mongolia. Vajrayana is at times called Tantric Buddhism in the west. It developed in the northern parts of India during the seventh century. This school is called Vajrayana because of the use of the Vajra. It is a symbol of thunder, diamond and lighting. The most prominent features of Vajrayana include the use of mantras, which is a form of chanting. It gives much importance to the teacher or guru. Another feature of Vajrayana is the significance of meditation, which also includes concentration techniques like; the visualisation of bodhisattvas (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/vajrayana#thevajra,www.indianetzone.com/22/vajrayana.htm on 03.03.06). Vajrayana followed the same route into northern China as Buddhism itself, arriving from India via the silk road some time during the first half of the 7th century C.E. (Tang Dynasty).

In Vajrayana instead of Vedic god Indra, Lord Buddha is worshipped. The followers of Phralung Buddhism maintains that Vajra dhyani Buddha is an incarnation of fully enlightened Buddha in his past life. They also opined that before entering into this part of the country, Assam, the Tais (Siu Ka Pha and his companions) were converted to Buddhists. They also viewed that the three priestly clans who are regarded as the present custodians of the Tai Ahom religion, could not represent the whole community. Thus although they are practicing their religious tradition based on the cult of ancestor worship, actually their religion is Phralung Buddhism, a sect of Mahayana Buddhism.
According to the Thai scholar Than Tun, a Buddhist movement spread down the Chindwin river valley from upper Burma to Pagan during the first half of the 13th century. This movement was characterized by ritual sacrifices of buffaloes, oxen, pigs, goats, and deer, as well as by the ritual consumption of amounts of alcoholic beverages. These rites clearly indicate that this was Vajrayana, or Tantric Buddhism (Tun 1959:47-69). The drinking of rice beer and the sacrifice of animals were essential to pre Buddhist Tai Religion (Terwiel:1983). Orthodox Theravada Buddhism disallows both these practices and would therefore have been much more alien to the Ahom, who were residing at that time in the Hukawng Valley in the upper reaches of the Chindwin river. It can be seen that Tantric Buddhism was much more akin — and indeed was probably a syncretic adaptation of the mother-goddess religion to the Buddhist system. This Tantric system entered South East Asia from Java to China and, because of its animistic basis, was adopted by the mass (Mysticism ch7 Buddhism, Christian Churches of God, Australia, www.ccg.org :11 on 03.05.06).

The scholars like J.N. Phukan argued that in matter of religion, the Tai Ahoms believed in a large number of pha and phi (gods and spirits), and worshipped many with sacrifices of birds and animals. Belief in khwan, or vital spirit was a part of belief systems. Ancestors (phi-dam) were regularly remembered and paid reverence by offering food items with prayer seeking blessings for health, wealth and peace. Because of their early contact with the Han Chinese who had repeatedly attempted to exert their suzerain authority over the southern non Han people like the Tai whom they labeled 'southern Barbarians', they received certain degree of Confucian ideals. At the same time a strong tinge of Mahayana Buddhist tenets was visible in their religious system and a thin layer of Taoist religion and also Hinayana Buddhism that came from northern Burma were not altogether absent (Phukan 1998-14). L.A. Waddell asserts that,

"In the thirteenth century we get another fixed point for a fresh wave of invaders. This time it was Mongolian and entered the valley from its upper end in the angle between China and Upper Burma. About 1228A.D. a tribe of 'Mau' (?Man) Shans called Ahom pressed northwards by the Burmese crossed from the Irrawadi basin into the upper valley of the Brahmaputra and occupied the bank of that river near Sadiya. Possessing a superior vigour and some civilization apparently of the
Burmese Buddhist kind they extended their rule gradually down the valley…” (Waddell 2000:10).

Suniti Kumar Chatterjee viewed that the Ahoms followed their old animistic religion. Similarly, David K. Wyatt, Professor of Thai History, Yale University, writes, ‘The 

Ahoms

were not Buddhists, but practised an animistic religion’ (Wyatt 1984:41). According to B.J. Terwel ‘all the available evidence point to the idea that this religion is to regarded as a branch of the old Tai religion and that no label should suffice to identify it’ (Terweil 1980:46).

Though in the Tai Ahom religion animistic trait of worshipping is present, such as, in worshipping the state (moung), the village (baan), the house (ruen), the fire (phai), forest (then), mountain (doi), river (naam), rice field (na), rice (khao) etc. Yet it is not a mere form of animistic form of religion. In certain ceremonies like Phura Lung, where God Almighty is worshipped in a non-violent or non sacrificial way and in the Chak lang, which is a marriage ceremony done with lighting of hundred and one earthen lamps and without any blood sacrifice. According to Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi, the central light of the mandala (the lotus circle having the lamps) in Chak Lang represents the Buddha, and the other hundred lights representing the Sangha of Bodhi-sattvas (Gogoi 1976:87). Sometimes around the central light five lamps are used to represent the five forms of Dhyaní Buddhas or meditative poses of Buddha, namely Amitabha, Aksobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, and Amogha siddhi. Among these figures of meditative poses the perfect form is Amitabha or Avalokitesvara. The lotus circle having hundred and one lights is the influence of Buddhism on Tai Ahom marriage system.

Buddhism being an Indian origin flourished in 6th Century B.C. with the initiative of Gautama Buddha to unfold the mystery of life’s suffering. This led him to the extreme point of human destiny and made him wise. Although the Tai Ahom religion has its own identity yet many scholars are of the view that there is some Buddhist influence on the Tai Ahom religion before its entrance to Assam. This was due to the conversion of the Tais of main-land South East Asia and the Tai-Ahoms were a branch of that Tai race. Early historians held that the spread of Buddhism was a process that began in Myanmar. Buddhism was the prevailing religion of China since 1st century A.D. and the effect was so much till the end of the 13th century and
almost all the Tais conversed into Buddhism. The Tai (Ahom) group that entered into Assam under the leadership of Chao lung Siu Ka Pha might have got the influence of Mahayana Buddhism which is reflected in the non sacrificial religious ceremony like Phuralmg and Chak Lang marriage ceremony performed by enlightening of hundred and one oil lamps.

Many Scholars hold that due to the Buddhists influence on the Tais of South East Asia the religion as brought by the Tai group under the leadership of Chao lung Siu Ka Pha inherited the germ of Buddhism. And because of the unavailability of correct data no definite conclusion is found regarding the Tai Ahom religion. Some Scholars like Dr. Lila Gogoi has forcefully argued that the Tais accepted Buddhism, but they did not give up many of the Tao rites and customs, even before their advent to Assam and that the Ahoms were in the first stage of Buddhism (Gogoi 1985:4-5). Again Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi is also of the same opinion that Buddhist elements are present in Ahom rituals but yet the Ahom religious belief is based on the supernatural powers, formless spirits, nats as they are called in Burmese, invoked with rice, eggs, flowers and sometimes with animal sacrifices but without the icons of gods for the purpose of worship (Gogoi 1976:9). To him, other branches of the Tai race in South East Asia embraced Buddhism, mainly the Thera-vada school. The ancestors of the Ahoms might have brought down to Burma a kind of mixed Buddhism from Yunnan (Gogoi 1976:16). Thus the Phura Lung ceremony and Chak Lang marriage ceremony constitute a Buddhistic element. According to him, Chak-Lang is typically a Tai Ahom ceremony but the lotus circle with one hundred and one lights appears to be Buddhistic. Again the central large light in the circle symbolizes the Phra or radiant Dhyani Buddha Amitabha or Avalokitesvara surrounded by the Bodhi-Satvas. The lotus figure represents the lotus of the heart which is at the root of the meditation of the Dhyani Buddha (Borgohain 1946:9). The prayer during Chak-Lang, there is mention of ‘O phra tra alang’ meaning we salute Phra (Buddha) tra (Dhamma) and alang (Sangha). Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi viewed Buddha as ‘Phra’ and to him Phura-Lung ceremony is performed with Buddhist devotional songs in Tai Ahom language and with great illumination by placing one hundred and one oil lights from the bottom to top of a trunk of banana plant erected in front of the priests.
However, B.J. Terweil, the Australian scholar, viewed that there is no trace of Buddhism in the early Buranjis, and the words such as 'Phra Lung’, which some would like to recognize, as Buddhist, need not necessarily refer to a Buddhist concept. Altogether there is no proof of a supposed Buddhist penetration in the traditional Ahom religion (Terweil 1980:46). Another Scholar Colonel Gurdon, the British scholar, also holds the same view that, one of the few non-Ahom trained observers who personally witnessed Ahom ceremonies also reports that there is no trace of Buddhism in traditional Ahom religion (Hastings 1908:236).

In the Tai Ahom religion, the concept of Heaven occupies a very important place whereas Buddhism, which is primarily a Godless religion, there is no concept of heaven or heavenly kingdom. So, the religion of the Tai Ahoms cannot be said to be influenced by Buddhism. According to some scholars, in the Phura Lung ceremony, hundred and one lamps are lighted and is done without any animal sacrifice. And it is believed by some scholars that this ceremony of lighting hundred and one lamps is due to the influence of Buddhism. However as against this it can be maintained that in almost all religions (with the concept of God or holiness), lights are offered. Therefore, this concept of light in the Tai Ahom religion cannot be said to be a mere influence of Buddhism. The prayers during Phura Lung and Chak Lang are found to be chanted by the priests in pure Tai language.

It is a fact that at present all the Ahoms excepting very few priestly families have adopted Hinduism as their religion. Only the three priestly clans retain their own Tai Ahom religion. Yet among them some have adopted Hinduism. Although it is said that the priestly clans are the custodians of Tai Ahom religion and have not undergone changes by adopting Hinduism as well as Hindu sects, yet it is seen that few of them, mostly the habitats in the town areas have adopted Hinduism. Few Mohan families in Maranjan as informed in the book. ‘Social relations in an Ahom Village’ got converted into Hinduism yet side by side they are continuing their own religious tradition. During field study in the years 2007-2008-2009, in some Ahom villages it is observed that some Mo’hung families of Bor Chahaki Gaon converted to ‘Sankari’ or a Vaisnavite sect in the name of Sankardeva. Under the influence of ‘Sankar Sangha’ this conversion in done. Again few Mo’hung families of Moranjan have adopted a
sub-sect of Hinduism known as *Krishna* Guru. Few *deodhai* families of Sepon Hologuri have adopted the sub-sect called *Anukul*.

From the field study made in the year 2008, it is observed that some traditional *Tai Ahom* people were converted into Buddhism on their own. A trend of conversion into Buddhism begins even before the formation of *Sadou Asom Phralung Sangha*, in 1972. In 1935 an *Ahom* individual (Chetia family) from Golaghat Kachugaon converted into Buddhism for the first time and got the name Nandavamsha Mahather. The other notable Buddhist monks from *Ahom* community are namely Bimalananda Vikkhu (Konwar family), Adhyaksa, Pali Vidyapith, Moumung, Arunachal; Uttara Vikkhu (Barua family), Giding, Sanglang, Arunachal; Kushalananda Vikkhu (Buragohain), Meo, Ratnagiri Buddha Bihar, Arunachal. Field study made in Shyam, Borpukhuri Buddha Gaon, field study in Lakua, 2008, shows that from last few years, few royal (*Rajkonwar*) families of Lakwa are rebounding into Buddhism. And this revert is still going on among the general *Ahoms* into Buddhism. And this sect, Phralung Buddhism has not yet got formal recognition as a religion yet, the process is continuing. Phralung Buddhism is not actually a sect of Buddhism like *Hinayana* and *Mahayana*, rather it is a new creation of the few *Ahoms* who wanted to be converted to Buddhism. But against this, Mr. Putul Konwar, the working president of *'Sodou Asom Konwar Bonkhawoli'* (this association was formed even before the independence of India and it was exactly in 1914 at Angera Konwar gaon) informed that they are the representatives of the *Ahom* Royal line and will never convert to Buddhism.

The *Ahom* Royal Society, Lakwa, has taken initiation in the conversion into Buddhism under the ‘*Assam Buddhist Minority Welfare Society (A Society for Minority Educational, Socio-Cultural and Economic Welfare)*’ (A.S.M.W.S) Estd. 2nd Dec. 2005. Programmes under Societies Registration Act No.XXI of 1860, the ‘*Ahom Phralung Buddha Sangha*’ have circulated registration forms among the *Ahoms* and the priestly families to get included in the Phralung Buddha Sangha as well as in the minority group with a belief that the *Tai Ahoms* were originally Buddhists. In a minority awareness leaflet as published and circulated by Assam Buddha Sangkhyaloghu Kalyan Samaj (Assam Buddhist Minority Welfare Society), Chiring Chapor,
Dibrugarh, March, 2010, few references are quoted from various sources, such as
'The Ahoms are considered to be a Thai Buddhist Tribe who arrived in this area
(Assam) during the thirteenth century and established their capital in Sibsagar', —
Students’ Britannica: India, vol.-One, 2000. And also it is stated there that ‘the
proposal for inclusion of Ahom Phralung Buddhist Tribe in the list of Scheduled
Tribes would now duly be considered when the Government decides to undertake a
legislation for the comprehensive revision of the lists of Scheduled Castes and
Scheduled Tribes’ (Shri B.N. Srivastava, Deputy Director, Ministry of Home Affairs,
Govt. of India, wrote this to Shri B. Gogoi, Member, Central Executive Committee,
Indian Buddhist Council, Nagaland, Kohima, in reference of his letter dated

The Indian Buddhist Council, Nagaland, Kohima, made a demand in the
year1982 for the inclusion of the Tai Ahom community (followers of Phralung
Buddhist cult) in the list of Scheduled Tribes of Assam in the plain area before the
Ministry of Home Affairs, India. After careful examination this office had sent
comments vide letter N.8/1/82-SS (Assam) dated 2nd Nov., 1982 to the then Home
Ministry that the Ahom as a community was not available with this office thus they
did not possess tribal characteristics. And it is further said that ‘It is a historical fact
that although the Tai Ahom or Ahom in general originally belonged to the Tai Shan
group of the great Mongoloid race, they got acculturised with the Hindus and
Brahmanical way of life over a period of time after their migration and settlement in
different parts of upper Assam. The 1931 Census report of Assam recorded 249,434
Ahoms in Assam spread over the various districts. Gradually Ahom rulers accepted
the Assamese language and the Hindu religion. In 1931 Census all the Ahoms were
returned as Hindus’.

According to the Government Report, the Tai Ahoms donot fulfil the relevant
criteria for considering a community eligible for the status of Scheduled Tribe, i.e.,
the primitive traits, distinct culture, geographical location, shyness of contact with
community at large and backwardness. The Tai Ahoms donot possess any distinct
tribal characteristics, hence, they were not given the Scheduled Tribe status.

In the TRI report it is mentioned that “the Ahoms called Tai (Celestial origin)
which is the name by which the Shans still designate themselves. The TRI report
makes it clear when it says that, 'besides the Tai Ahoms, other groups of Tai people have also made their settlements in Assam. They are the Khamtis, Phakes, Aitons, Khamyangs, Moran and Turungs' and these are not listed as Scheduled Tribes in Assam. Therefore, the Tai Ahoms case cannot be viewed in isolation as the above mentioned ethnic groups of Tai or Shan origin are also not having Scheduled Tribes status in Assam.... In case the Tai Ahom is considered for inclusion in the list of scheduled tribes of Assam it would open the flood gate of similar claims not only from other sections of Ahom but also from other communities of the great Shan race mentioned above. Probably due to these reasons the earlier expert committees such as the Lokur Committee (1965) and the Joint Committee of Parliament for the revision of the lists of SC/ST/ (1967) did not recommended their inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes of Assam.

In any religion there is a provision for conversion. So, if one feels himself to be efficient to adopt or practise any particular religion then he can do so. In case of Tai-groups of North-East except a number of Tai Ahoms, they are all converted either into Buddhism or Christianity before their advent to this part of the country or later on and the Ahoms adopted Hinduism, a few Buddhism, at present it is came to know that few Ahom intellectuals, few priestly families and a few members of Ahom Royal family (Lakwa) got conversed into Buddhism. And due to this assimilation the purity is deluged, and many ideas and rituals of different adopted religions entered into the Tai Ahom as well as other Tai groups of North-East India. Particularly in case of the Tai groups Phake, Aiton, Khamyang, Turung, Khamti; the Monpas of Arunachal are conversed into Buddhism. Whereas the maximum of Ahoms and Meiteis (Gouriya) conversed into Hinduism, but their traditional tribal religion is still retained and practised side by side with Hinduism.

However, it must be noted that all the priestly families habitating in the villages under Bakata Mouza are still practicing and retaining their original Tai rituals and ceremonies and the priestly families have preserved their original manuscripts and they can read or speak the Tai language fluently. In 1962 Mohan Deodhai Bailung Sanmilan was formed to save the Tai Ahom religion. And with the kind support of this association till today performance of the Tai Ahom rituals and ceremony, translation and transliteration of Tai manuscripts, preservation of manuscripts
projects are undertaken. Besides these *Sadou Asom Ahom Sanmilan* (1893), *Sadou Asom Buranji Sanskriti Sangha* (1955), Patsaku Kendria Vidyalaya (1964), *Sadou Asom Phralung Sangha* (1972), Diploma Course in *Tai* language (Modern *Tai* language) (1974) is opened in Dibrugarh University for the sake of reviving *Tai* language and tradition. *Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sobha* or *Ban Ok Pup Lik Moung Tai* (1981), the *Tai Ahom* council (1987), Chao Lung Siu Ka Pha International Foundation in the year 2009 are set up for the development of the *Tai Ahom* community in the academic and socio-cultural sides. And with the support of the above organizations the traditional rites and ceremonies as well as academic conferences are taken to observe by the *Tai Ahom* priestly clans and the *Ahom* people. The revivalism is now going on and undoubtedly this is the search for the root or origin. This observance of *Chak Lang* marriage ritual among the general *Ahom* people is a best result of revivalism cum revitalisation.

The traditional setting of religio-cultural platform seems to be a mixture of many religious ideas, beliefs and practices and this is undoubtedly a process of religio-cultural assimilation. Yet it should be pointed out that a few number of *Tai Ahom* priestly families are still performing and preserving ancient *Tai*-heritage and this has made them to be one of the *Tai* race.

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