Chapter VII
NATIONALITY FORMATION

The Brahmanical Influence
Aryanisation/Sanskritisation/Hinduisation

The Brahmanical influence appears to have been an important factor in the formation of the Ahom state. Some dimensions of wider significance appear before us as the data would lead us to believe. The ruling Ahoms accepted Hinduism and so encouraged their subjects; adopted the Assamese language as the official language in place of their own Tai language paving the way for the birth of a greater Assamese nationality; adopted the Aryan culture leading to changes in life and life styles; and finally, patronised the Brahmana-Vaishnava priesthood by throwing away huge resources of the state at their cost. Further, some diametrically opposite trends were also discernible. The Ahoms were not admitted to the higher status within the Hindu society. Similarly, the Hindus were not admitted to the top level administrative crust of the Ahom bureaucracy. Thus complexities and contradictions were writ large in such processes and perhaps, the road to Ahom statehood was lying in the reconciliations of such contradictions.
Therefore, in the context of our thematic study, we feel it imperative to look into the concept of Brahmanism in a perceptive manner. It may be noted that we have been using the terms Hinduisation/Sanskritisation/Aryanisation/Brahmanical influence in a broad common sense, sometimes complementarily and interchangeably unless otherwise specified.

New lights have been thrown on the concept of Aryan culture and civilisation and the Brahmanical elements within it. The Rig-Vedic period was the florescence of the Aryan culture followed by the Brahmanic and Upanishadic periods. The periods cover a wide space in its course of development witnessing tremendous changes. We would confine ourselves, in utmost brief, only to the trends of changes for our purpose.

The Rig-Vedic society was simple and gentile in its character. The social division of labour was emerging but it was not based on caste rigidity. The most exalted god was

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1. Shivanath Barman, "Vedabikshana," published in the Assamese three monthly (now monthly) magazine, Prakasah, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1st, 2nd and 3rd issues April, July, and October respectively, 1976. Barman has made illuminating studies on the socio-political and philosophical aspects of Hindu Aryan civilisation based on extensive data of the three periods of the Rig-Vedic, Brahmanic and Upanishadic Ages through a multi-disciplinary approach. We have largely followed him, as far as the concept of Brahmanism is concerned.
Indra. Agriculture was the simplest means of production within a gentile subsistence economy. Though agriculture developed in later times, the high caste Aryans used to digest it. The characteristic feature was that under the Hindu Aryans, a highly developed Oriental civilisation was emerging; the Hindu Aryans without ever becoming agriculturists.

This was followed by the Brahmanic period which was marked by the rise of worldly and materialistic outlook of the Hindu Aryans. The term 'Brahma' signified to mean food and property. Herein Debi Prasad Chattopadhyaya observes,

If it is possible to read in the Vedic Brahma any philosophical significance at all, this philosophy would have to be characterised as starkly materialistic, though inevitably a primitive and crude one.

The Brahmanic Age appears to have been in the last stage of Barbarism and at the beginning of civilisation.

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2Ibid, 2nd Issue, p. 49.


4Barman, n. 2, p. 52, dates the Brahmanic Age in between 1000-6500 B.C. This is also the date ascribed by Suniti Kumar Chat Chatterjee to the first Aryanisation and Brahman settlement in Assam; see, The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India, Gauhati University, 1970, p. 13.


6Barman, n. 2, p. 52, citing Luis Morgan on the stages of civilisation.
The use of iron leading to the development in agricultural technique, commercial expansions, brought enormous changes to the Vedic society. Agricultural production definitely increased during this period. There was an eastward movement of the Aryans in search of agricultural land at this time. This was also a period of transition from 'clan life to family life and class life'. The clan/tribe consciousness gradually changed into class consciousness; the Gana was replaced by the Janapadas (states) and the clan/tribal chiefs were replaced by the kings. The Aryan division of labour based on Kshatriya, Brahmana, Vaishya, Sudra appeared as class divisions, the Kshatriya and the Brahmana being in the highest ladder of the society. The Giteyana Brahmana mentions that the Brahmana performing the coronational rites of the kings should be given thousand gold mohors, a paddy field and some quadruple animals. Thus it marked the beginning of the unequal access to resources, the emergence of private property in marginal form and the superiority of the Brahmanas as a distinct intellectual class. However, the Brahmins did not appear to have been rich enough to maintain their high

8 Barman, n.2, p.55.
status in the society and as such, they started moving out to the surrounding tribal states where their role as a class of people with higher knowledge and all their magic cantrips, became instrumental in bringing about socio-cultural changes. In other words, they helped detribalisation and in the words of Kaushambi, for all his magic cantrips the brahmanas immigrating into tribal lands was at first the effective pioneer and educator, though inevitably becoming a more drain upon production. 9

In the Upanishodic period, the growing social contradictions mounted. An attempt was made with ideological philosophical of ‘high moral’ and ‘exalted sentiment’ 10 to arrest the trends of growing social inequalities in the society but against this, the growing Brahmanical materialistic culture continued to present a picture in which it was ‘difficult to conceive of anything more brutal and more material than the theology of Brahmanas’ 11 since the Kshatriya-Brahmin class combination, by this time, became an instrument of exploitation of the common masses.

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It is mainly on such a conceptual frame that we have been attempting to trace the impact of Brahmanical influence in the formation of the Ahom state.

The earliest signs of the intrusion of the Brahmanical influence is found during the reign of Sudangpha Bamuni Konwar (1395-1407). He seems to have been the first Ahom king to adopt the coronational rites by ascending the Singarighar with other elaborate rituals, pomp and grandeur, showering upon benefices to the ranks and files, and

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12 Sudangpha Bamuni Konwar's accession to the throne was an accident of history. His accession preceded an interregnum of nine years. The nobles who were in search of a suitable prince (Konwar) found him out in a Brahmin family of Habung who was said to have been the son of the deposed king Taokhamthi (1380-1389) by his younger wife who was supposed to have been killed at the orders of his elder wife. But she delivered a child in the said Brahmin family, and died. The child was being brought up there when the nobles found him. See P. Gogoi, The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms, Guwahati University, 1968, p. 274.

There are other accidental occurrences for which the Ahom kings said to have leaned towards Hinduism. Shashengpha Pratap Singh was said to have been under the influence of an evil spirit. He got rid of this after performing some Brahmanical rites, and therefore, he became grateful to the Brahmins and patronised them with land grants. Similarly, Satamla Jayadhwaj Singh also patronised Brahmins as atonement for his patricide. See S. K. Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1826, DNAC, Guwahati, 1942, p. 18. However, such elements appear to be imaginary and often polemic, and hence, not very relevant for our purpose.

13 The system of ascending the Singarighar seems to have existed earlier with the Tai-Ahoms but in a crude form; the Brahmanical influence might have added only decency and decorum in the ritual celebrations.
by striking coins although the Ahoms hardly knew about money economy. This was a significant development in the Ahom state formation process because the political authority remained no longer exactly identical with the armed Ahom populace in its totality or the Tribal council representing it. The rudimentary formations thus received a push for further sophistications to follow.

The Brahmanical influence had its further manifestations during the reign of Suhummung Dihingia Raja (1497-1539). The reign of this monarch witnessed the expansion of the Ahom territory and its population was almost double than what had been in a century past. The annexation of the Chutiya kingdom in particular, added a large number of Hindu population. The king now came to have a Hindu title of Swargnarayan (god of heaven) and came to be known more popularly as Swargadev which became the official title of the Ahom state. This was undoubtedly the ingenuity of the

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14 Numismatic evidence is lacking in this regard. In fact, it is difficult to say as to who amongst the Ahom kings first issued coins. There is strong historical evidence that Suhummung Dihingia Raja might be the first Ahom king to do so but no coins of his reign so far discovered. Next, the earliest Ahom coins discovered so far, is assigned to Suhummung Garganya Raja (in about 1543 A.D.) but a recent decipheration reads the name as Suhummung Chakradhwaj Singha (1667-1669). See for details, Murai Charan Das, Coins of Assam, SOUVENIR of the 74th Annual Conference of the Numismatic Society of India, Dec., 1986, pp. 1-6; published by the Director of Museums, Guwahati, Assam.

Brahmins who left no chance to graft the Hindu myths on Ahom legends and deified the Ahom monarch with Indra, the lord of heaven, attributing a sacral status to him. The 'divine right theory' was now fully played up sanctifying the legitimacy and validity of the dynastic rule of the Ahom monarchs before the common subjects, both Hindus and non-Hindus. Because the legitimacy and the validity of the monarchy so projected would ensure a support which would not require the use of force or threat or coercion.\(^{16}\) In other way also, the Ahom nobles found a ground to identify themselves with the Brahmana literati in forming a ruling group since the Ahom society too was traditionally stratified.\(^{17}\) Such a seemingly adjustment with the Hindu rigidities was possible for a common interest of holding on to the unequal access to the resources.

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\(^{16}\) With regard to the problems of sovereign's legitimization, M.J. Swartz has observed, 'legitimacy is the type of support that derives not from force or its threats but from the values held by the individuals formulating, influencing and being affected by political ends'. Adding further to the idea of the 'degree of legitimization', Swartz says, 'in reality a political system that is based on either coercion or on consensus only is found nowhere. There will always be a combination of both, the degree of legitimacy representing the relative proportion of each'. To this, Claessen concludes, 'only where the majority of the population accepts the authority of the ruler and considers his laws and regulations acceptable will a sufficient degree of observance (of the laws and regulations) be found'. See H.J. M. Claessen & Peter Skalnik, eds., *The Early State*, Mouton Publishers, The Hague, 1978, p. 566.

\(^{17}\) The Ahom society was traditionally stratified in terms of the king, the nobility and the commoners. The chronicles bear ample testimony to this.
With the conquests and absorptions of numerous Hindu population, the conquest society \(^{18}\) emerged into a plural society where a rule with the gentile order was no longer possible and the organs of the gentile constitution had to be transformed into the organs of the state. \(^{19}\) Thus the first transformation in the gentile constitution of the Ahoms took place when the king added one more member to the council of ministers in the creation of the Barpatra Gohain. It was not without protest from the other two ministers but the king’s argument for this is worth noting. He said, ‘Kingship is the golden platter, the two Gohains constitute its two silver legs and a third one is needed’. \(^{20}\) The argument is essentially Kautilyan in sum and Brahmanical in substance.

During the reign of Sushengpha Pratap Singh (1603-1641), the Brahmanical influence continued unabated. \(^{21}\) Land grants

\(^{18}\) In all our discussions, following Wittfogel, we have used the term ‘conquest society’ to mean a society in which conquerors take up residence in the lands they have seized, when they neither liquidate nor expel the native population and when they are sufficiently numerous to establish a cohesive and distinct alien ruling body apart from and above their new subjects’. Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, New Haven, London, 1957, p. 325.


\(^{20}\) Amalendu Guha, n. 15, p. 29.

took a form of patronising the Brahmins. Octagonal shaped Ailvoms coins were now issued following a sloka in the Yoginitantra. Because of their retentive memory and intelligence, the Hindus, particularly the Brahmins were appointed in the state diplomatic and espionage (katakis and Bairagis) services. This was necessitated by the expansion of the Ahom territory into lower Assam which brought into contact with the Koches and the Mussalmans. By this time, the Ahoms were fast becoming a minority, and the adoption of the Hindu names along with their Ahom names was the natural outcome and became customary too.

Sutamla Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-1663) was the first Ahom king to embrace Hinduism officially. He is also said to have been the first Ahom king to have issued copper plate grants. Meanwhile, within Hinduism, Brahmanism faced a challenge from the popular neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankara-Cdeva (1449-1568). Jayadhwaj Singha's ordination through the Vaishnavite preceptor speaks of the growing influence of this new sect. The dimensions of the neo-Vaishnavite movement are too vast to have been able to focus here. However, we

22 Satsori Aom Buranji, ed., S.K. Bhuyan, Guwahati University, 4th edn., 1974, p. 137; Sadarmin, n. 21, p. 37, has mentioned the particular sloka from the Yoginitantra in this respect. It is also believed that the reason for adopting the octagonal shaped coins might be due to the eight lakha gods and goddesses of the Tai-Ahom kingdom the chronicles frequently mention or might be due to the eight chiefs who accompanied Sukapha who always held Assam as their joint conquest. Incidentally, the later Ahom burial mounds had also eight-cornered boundary.
have dealt with some of these aspects elsewhere in the
chapters only in keeping with the theme of our study where
necessary, any way, the overall impact of Hinduism through
the neo-Vaishnavite movement resulted in far reaching
transformations in the socio-political spheres. In course
of time, it became an agency for gradual social changes of
the Ahoms and tribal peoples from animism to Hinduism; from
pile-house dwelling to mud-plinth house dwelling; from the
burial practice of the dead to cremation; from languages
Tai and tribal to Assamese, and so on and so forth.

J.B. Bhattacharjee also holds almost similar views in
case of the Dimasa State formation. Following him, in Ahom’s
case, we may say that the transformations of the Ahom poli-
tical system from its indigenous tribal like formations
to a monarchical state was reached mainly through syncretic
adoption of the symbols of Hinduism by bringing the tribes
within the broad Hindu-based Aryan civilisation generated
through the eastern plains of India. The Brahmanical myths
gave the rulers divine descent which produced an image of
inviolability to the kingship - a process that strength-
ed its base to integrate not only the cognate clans and


and bordering tribes but also the culturally and technologically advanced Hindu population.\textsuperscript{24} Thus the divine origin gained through the corridor of Brahmanical influence enabled the king to resort to more warfares; enabled to extract more surplus which served as an effective instrument in the process of state formation.\textsuperscript{25} The hierarchical social structure leading to a highly centralised authority and the resultant social stratifications, all received an impetus through the Brahmanical influence and sustained through the exploitation of the pyke labours.

It is generally believed that the reason for adopting Hinduism by the Ahom rulers arises out of a deliberate policy.\textsuperscript{26} Having been reduced to a minority, the Ahoms would not be able to fair well in the midst of a conquest.


\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 10.

\textsuperscript{26} S.K. Bhuyan, p. 12, p. 19.


Terwiel does not agree to this view. To him, it was a gradual assimilation instead of a deliberate policy, till such evidence is produced.

Otherwise also, we do not find any evidence that the Ahom rulers imposed the Hindu religion on others.
where majority subjects would be Hindus, speaking the Assamese language. Thus not only religion but also the language of their own were sidetracked in favour of the Hindu religion and the Assamese language. This was a measure appears to be sound and expedient at the time because at the bottom of the stratification level, it brought about a unity and consolidation which was at the root of the birth of a greater Assamese nationality inspite of the multi-ethnic divergencies encompassing the proverbial "unity in diversity" adage. The "Ahom" became a name signifying the ruling class; for all practical purpose, it was the Assamese state.

But it had also other corollary developments. In the wake of the Hinduisation process, the Hindu priesthood emerged in a specifically strong position organised in hierarchical corporations and clearly distinguished from other ruling groups. The initiation or ordination rituals indicating the scale of political socialisation; imposition of guru-ka{27}(tithes to religious preceptors); status determination through the number of disciples initiated; the

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{27} Amalendu Guha, Neo-Vaishnavism to Insurgency: ... etc. Occasional Paper No.57, CSSS, Calcutta, 1984, p.54(FN 44).

Guha characterizes it as a customary obligation institutionalized in course of the 18th century. To us, it appears nothing more than an imposed obligation; a kind of tax rather.
ordination of the royalty and the nobility/aristocracy adding to the prestige dimensional issues; growth of a highly exalted notion of the Hindu priesthood by extending the cult of divinity to the guru\(^{28}\) — all these were conspicuous developments in the ongoing social transformations.

The sustenance to all this came from the lower level of the society. Because, at the top level, both spiritual and temporal leaders had the same common cause in maintaining the unequal access to the resources. To the religious leaders, religion in disguise, became the instrument of exploitation as it had been to temporal ones for political power and self. No wonder, 'state within the state'\(^{29}\) set in.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 3. Guha says that the master-servant became Godman relationship for both god and the guru were deemed as one.

\(^{29}\) Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696), earlier during the period of his escapades, personally experienced this in some of the satras.

Again, the Moamoria Mahanta Anabhujadeva, at the time of his son Deka Mahanta's attempt at rebellion said, "Why do you need the wealth of a king? The house owns large baskets (belum) each full of gold and silver; one king and one Moamoria; ten/twelve thousand bhakats (devotees); eight/tion thousand slaves and servants; ten/twelve numbers of khats (large agricultural firms); four/five thousand buffaloes; what Moamoria can do in one day, the king cannot do in one year." (Translation ours). Guha also says, 'the number of its lay disciples ran into a few lakhs.'

This sums up the concept of 'state within the state'. See S.K. Bhuyan, n.21, p. 116 & 146; Guha, n. 27, p. 24; H.K. Borpuja-ori, Veleshew Nirvalon Aru Moamoria Bridobin: Prakash, Publication Board, Guwahati, March, 1989, p. 73.
Therefore, we find the operation of the 'patronise and persecute' policy in later times adopted by the Ahom rulers which was like the one of 'divide and rule' policy, as someone might say.

The Hinduisation process was essentially a civilising process. The mark of civilisation is the growing contradictions in 'a fall from the simple moral grandeur of the ancient gentile society. The lowest interests - base greed, brutal sensuality, sordid avarice, selfish plunder of common possessions - usher in the new civilised society, class society; ... and the new society ... has never been anything but the development of the small minority at the expense of the exploited and oppressed great majority. An apotheosis that Engels pronounced long ago.

The contradictions thus generated through the Hinduisation process were stupendous in scale and magnitude and, perhaps, in the reconciliation of which was the mature state.

30 F. Engels, n. 19, p. 98.
31 Guha, n. 27, p. 20, pp. 52 (FN 35). Guha has highlighted the range of such contradictions and observes, 'The perpetual grant of thousands of acres as devottar, charottar and brahmottar estates on considerations of winning new allies was detested by the temporal nobility'. He has further convincingly shown that the alienation of land and the pyke services reached alarming and threatening proportions, particularly during the 18th century.
Cross-Cultural variables

From the pre-historic times, Assam was the home of non-Aryan tribes, animism being the dominant feature in their socio-religious life. They were the Kiratas, the Miris, the Kacharis, the Gao, the Bodo, the Khasi etc., etc., having Mongoloid traits and features. Therefore, to the Aryans the Northeast was a mlechhadesa, a significant sociological term in the context of Aryan and non-Aryan relations. The earliest Hindu impact in Assam or say in the Northeast seems to have been the prevalence of the Saivic cult. Siva was usually considered as a non-Aryan God. Simplicity of the tribal life was indicative of Saivism which had its influence even before the advent of the Ahoms. The god 'Siva' might have been a later inclusion in the Hindu pantheon and it is in this context, some scholars find a Mongolian-Aryan cultural

synthesis 34 and therefore, it is not unlikely that the Ahom god 'Langkuri' was being identified with Siva. However, Saivism had no proselytizing elements and it marks a passivity in the civilizing process even though some of the Ahom rulers consecrated temples and establishments which admits the fact that Saivism occupied a special place in Assam. 35

The process of Hinduisation began in the Northeast under the Kamarupa rulers when large number of Brahmins were patronised and when Sanskritization led to the development of the Assamese language from the tribal bases. The disappearance of the Kamarupa kingdom and in the absence of a strong centralised polity, the process received a set back. However, in the Bhuyan Chiefdoms and in the Chutia kingdom, the process continued to hang on. Aryanisation did not lose its ground. Nevertheless the process was rather slow in Upper Assam and when the Ahoms landed there, an Ahomisation process emerged there. But with the annexation and absorption of the Chutiya state and the petty Bhuyan principalities at first, and followed by the Koch

34 Ibid.
35 Lila Gogoi, n. 32, p. 40.
kingdom later, the Ahomisation process had to give way to the Hinduisation process. Thus the process gained momentum only after the political consolidation of the Ahom state, emerging in a highly centralised polity under Brahmanical impact, the course of which has already been described as above.

Another dimension of the Hinduisation process, in its cross-cultural aspects, is seen in the proselytization of the Bhakti cult that emerged through the development of the Assamese literature. The neo-Vaishnavite movement produced the translations of the Bhagavat-purana, the Mahabharata, Harivamsa, parts of the Padma-purana, the Vishnu-purana and others in the Assamese language. The major part of the Bhagavat-purana was translated by Sankaradeva himself which afterwards became the Bible of the Vaishnavas of Assam. The chief merit of such literary works was that it was rendered into the simplest form of the Assamese language with a mass appeal. It was like the first translation of the Bible into the English language which then became the basis for later development of the English language. It was no exception in case of the development and growth of the Assamese language too. Other similar works of Sankaradeva
like the *Kirtana, Namghosa* etc. which were undoubtedly literary master-pieces of the time, became the symbol of the Assamese nation and nationality, a factor of great significance in the development of the Assamese nationalism. Besides, Sankaradeva, the father of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam, was a man of uncommon genius combining in himself all the great qualities of a poet, musician, painter, dancer, singer, composer and actor and above all, being a spiritual guide and a social reformer, he could make profound impact on the common masses.

But the Brahmanic cult was not only caste oriented but also class dominated. It was, in fact, prone to social inequalities and its unfounded liberal patronisation by the despotic Ahom rulers added new dimensions in the socio-political spheres. The neo-Vaishnavite movement was the product of the social circumstances of the time. In countering the Brahmanical overjealousness, Sankaradeva visualised the trends of social changes which were emerging and taking forms and so he wrote in *Bhagavat* XII that 'rich man alone is considered as a man of great caste, of good manners and of great qualities. The powerful man commits all sins and always has his victory by corruption. The twice-born people
have forsaken their holy duties, but do hypocritically put
a show of them; they are avaricious and, bereft of their
castely duties...  

No doubt, this gives sufficient indication of the growing social contradictions in terms
of social and economic inequalities. Maheswar Neog has
rightly projected the role of Sankaradeva as a social
revolutionary when he says:  

It is precisely to protest against and correct the evils of social and individual life that Sankaradeva
wrote. Yet do we not call him a social revolutionary,
weeping nihilism on a corrupted world. He did rather
seek to purify society of its evil from within. He
saw what ailed society - caste hatred, sacer-dotalism,
economic exploitation... to uproot them would have
meant a great upheaval.

To uproot them would have meant the end of the state!
Because, the state is an organisation of the possessing
class for its protection against the non-possessing class.  

Because, all revolutions until now have been revolutions
for the protection of one kind of property against another
kind of property.  

Because, the process of Hinduisation

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36 Maheswar Neog, "Social Protest in the Poetry of Sankara-
deva, and its Fulfilment" in: SOUVENIR of the GOLDEN JUBILEE
of the DHAS, Guwahati, 1978-79, pp. 41-42.
38 Engels, Origin of the Family, Private Property...
p. 169.
essentially being a civilising one, the exploitation of one class by another was the basis of this civilisation, and as such, the whole development moved in a continuous contradiction, as the subsequent history of the Ahom state had proved.

As a solution, Sankaradeva adopted the most simple but a very ingenuous means. It was the Bhakti cult. Sankaradeva's success was his ability to make the social protest of his time a practicable proposition and in restoring a balance in society by arresting the evils of casteism of the Hindu religion since Bhakti was no respecter of caste. That the caste system could not raise its ugly head in Assam as it did elsewhere in India at that time and even to day was largely due to Sankaradeva's humanising precepts. Another reason for the success of the neo-Vaishnavite movement was in its democratic elements. It drew a large number of followers because in the eyes of god all men were equal. The message of Sankaradeva was clear and it drew the divergent ethnic population including the ruling Ahoms magnetically to its fold even including some Brahmins.

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40 ibid, p.174.
41 Maheswar Neog, p.36, p.41.
yet neo-Vaishnavism failed to meet the challenges of the conservative forces, instead, it made a compromise by sanctioning the observance of the traditional rites and performance of blood sacrifices by the ruling Ahom monarchs. Otherwise also, the first support to the Bhakti movement came from some of the Kayastha Bhuyans who recently lost their political power in the hands of the Ahoms and who were also joined by some intellectual Brahmins and other professional traders and artisans. Thus the Bhakti cult of the neo-Vaishnavite movement was turned towards the favour of ruling class interest and in due course, some Vaishnavite preceptors became influential members in the royal court.

It became a meaningful device for exploitations of the passive masses by the Hindu intellectuals in the garb of religious preceptors so much so that their greed for political power and self-nakedly manifested when they dribbled in the court intrigues particularly during the period of weak rulers (1673-1681) and thereafter. Some of them openly

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42 Amalendu Guha, Neo-Vaishnavism to Insurgency: ... CSSS, Calcutta, 1984, p. 9.

43 K. K. Barpujari, "Vaishnav Nirayaton Aru ... " etc. in: Prakash, Feb., 1985, p. 65; Amalendu Guha, Ahom Political System ... etc., p. 31; Maheswar Neog, Socio-Political Events in Assam leading to the Militancy of the Mayamariya Vaishnavas, S.D. Beunkar Lectures on Indian History, 1979, CSSS, Calcutta, published by K. P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta-12, 1982, p. 18. Neog has perceptively analysed the main currents of the Moamoria Uprisings. We have followed him where necessary for our purpose.
involved themselves in king making.\textsuperscript{44} In short, the top Vaishnavite elites forgot the tenets of Sankaradeva and became the victims of materialism because, ‘A title to the headship of a sattra was thus one to wealth and to the command over a large number of people’.\textsuperscript{45} Therefore, Guha sounds convincing when he argues:

By the end of the 17th century, the mainstream of neo-Vaishnavism was no more viewed as a lower-caste challenge to the feudal social inequality by the authorities concerned. It began to receive state patronage and turn itself into an agency of collaboration. For, its cult of bhakti (devotion) and sharana (surrender)\textsuperscript{46} could be and was used to ramify the feudal culture.

Another significant aspect of such dimension was the mushroom growth of the satras, both on royal patronage and popular support, which became the sanctuaries for truant pykes. The Ahom government failed to handle the situation since the satras already becoming very powerful social institutions. Instead, finding out a solution or striking a reconciliation, the government complicated the matter by bringing in the shakta faith to an official status. The sort of ‘divide and rule’ policy, in the religious milieu,

\textsuperscript{44} When Bandar Barphukan and other nobles decided to make Gadapani the king, Banamali Gosain, the Satradhika of Dakshinpat Satra told to the Barphukan, ‘Pukar, you are my disciple. The Lara Raja (the boy king Sulikpha) is also my disciple. Therefore, you should not do such things’, to which the Barphukan replied, ‘King making cannot be done by me alone. All have agreed to have a suitable king’. See \textit{Assam Purandar}, n.21, p.57.

\textsuperscript{45} Maheswar Neog, n.43, p.13.

\textsuperscript{46} Amalendu Guha, \textit{Ahom Political System} ... n.15, p.31.
putting *shaktism* against Vaishnavism, leading to 'persecute and patronise' policy, now failed to deliver the goods.

Thus Vaishnavism and *shaktism*, entangled in the race of political power and influence, the spiritual nobility became conterminous with the feudalistic elements and the political culture of the Ahom state transformed radically. The Ahom state edifice built upon the exploited labours of the pyke militia which synchronized both agricultural surplus and warfares had so long served the ideological purpose of the state. But the warfares were over and the agricultural surplus was stabilized and hence, the ideology became empty. The growing internal conflicts and contradictions could not produce any alternative goal to reconcile the contradictions. The kin-based Ahom feudalism was now fast decaying weakening the central authority then what it had been in the past sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Similar was the case with the pykes whose ideological base of *rajbhakti* now got transformed into *gurubhakti* - all under the impact of Hinduisation whose materialistic culture encompassed the civilising process in amassing more wealth, property, prestige and power leading to enormous contradictions and complexities which the Ahom state found it unable to dispel.
secondly, the population structure of the Ahom state in the 17th century Assam also contributed the rapid transformations. The multi-ethnicity character of the population was rudely shaken by the Hinduisation process. Terror and thought control could no longer be the means of the state to exact obligation. The Ahom character of the state was fastly disappearing, being replaced by an Assamese one; in other words, the process of detribalisation was complete. The term 'Ahom' now signified only a handful of Ahoms belonging to the ruling class. Because at the common level of the totality, the blend between Ahom and Assamese along with some other detribalised groups became so complete that some Assamese just could trace their Ahom descent. Thus the Hinduisation process exploded the myth of 'the old conception of national character based on biological differences'. In other words, the Hinduisation process became Assamification process. The state got bewildered and perplexed at its own creation and at the vastness of the complexities arising out of such enormous changes in trend and texture.

There was no major constitutional change in the Ahom constitution in the 17th and 18th centuries so as to meet the new challenges produced by an advancing society. This marks the stagnancy of the Ahom state of the 'oriental despotic character so often described by Marx. Otherwise also, the Ahom political system proved inadequate to the development of either political democracy or economic growth, if we may use the concept in the western sense. The Ahom system contained no elements which could have brought revolutionary changes from the top as it was in England, or from the middle as it was in France, or from the bottom as it was in Russia. It only exposed the sheer morbidity of the medieval feudalistic decadence, an explanation to which we have been attempting in the feudal-tribal contradictions.

**Feudal-Tribal contradictions**

*The Moamoria factor*

By the middle of the 17th century, the Ahom state emerged into full-fledged statehood.

At the apex of the state structure was the Swargadev who appointed his feudatories preferably from amongst the kin-group lineaged based families, which we have already

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shown as monopoly bureaucracy. His power vis a vis the power of the state too, entirely rested on the exploitation of the paik labour and militia. Theoretically, all land belonged to him but in practice, it was held by the feudatory nobles (Pangarias) in the form of Bilats in which the khel/pyke system was the backbone of the entire agricultural surplus productions, the allotted pykem/kheles being construed as the inalienable property of the nobles. The economy of the state was basically agriculture, the pyke/khel system being the sole foundation of the whole state edifice.

The pyke citizenry constituted of all the common adult male population on whom the whole burden of maintaining the royalty, the nobility including the spiritual lords rested. Further, they had to perform military duties and to execute all the important public works. The pyke/khel system was so organised that special care was taken to see that agriculture under no circumstances would suffer besides meeting the military exigencies.

Practical affairs of the state were delegated to a council of ministers known as the Patra Mantri consisting of the three Great Gohains, the Barua and the Barphukan.

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50 Sarbananda Rajkumar, Itihas Gaunsakara Bachar, Barua printing House, Jorhat, Assam, 1980, pp. 390-399. Rajkumar has given a detailed account of the various Bilats held by the feudatory nobility in an hierarchical order, their functions and duties, with well defined areas of control.
This was a sort of military aristocracy except of course, the Barbarua who was entrusted mainly with the task of civil administration but he too, had to go to war and command the army when necessary. Thus, it was followed by an elaborate bureaucratic set up with a gradation of officers like the Barua, the Phukan, the Rajkhowa, Neog, Hazarika, Saikia and Bora with well defined duties and functions. The monarchy was absolute, whose commands were hardly violated and whose pragmatism sometimes generated serious internal conflicts. Yet the three Great Gohains had extra constitutional powers to remove the king when found inefficient and weak, by an unanimous decision, a sort of balance of power between the monarch and the nobility; a remnant legacy of the notion of their joint conquest of Assam. These

51 The pragmatism of Rudra Singha (1696-1714) can be cited here. His four sons succeeded to the throne one by one though the normal procedure was the succession of the eldest son of the reigning king was the established rule. Here also the third son Mohanlal was deprived of the throne on technical grounds of being pox marks. Thus, this marks the weakening of the central authority and had cast big shadows on the outbreak of the Mornoria uprisings in later times.

52 Later on, with the polarisation of the Satgharia Ahom clans, the notion of joint conquest died hard and was replaced by joint rights of conquest and therefore, the government they together formed and continued to maintain was neither a monarchy nor an aristocracy per se but a mixture of both overlaid on a largely tribal social organisation. See Amalendu Guha, The Ahom Political System etc., n. 15, p. 20.
officials received no salary but made lucrative living
from the perquisites of office. A strong ruler could manage
to maintain a luxurious court while at the same time he
could keep the rapaciousness of the court nobles within bounds. The monarch practised polygamy\(^53\) and his wives included the daughters of the nobles and as well as of the commoners.

There are also eye-witness accounts with regard to the political system of the Ahoms left by Shihabuddin Talish\(^54\) and J.P. Wade, while no major difference appears in their accounts, which are mostly corroborated by both the Ahom and Assamese Buranjis. J.P. Wade has perceptively characterized the political system of the Ahoms existing at that time which appears relevant for our purpose. Wade records, 
"the civil constitution of the kingdom partly Monarchical, partly Aristocratical, exhibits a system highly artificial, regular and novel; however defective in other respects. That the Military arrangement is founded on feudal tenure with respect to the tributary princes; but on a Militia within the limits of the kingdom\(^55\)"

\(^53\) Normally, the Ahom king had several wives - the Barkunwari, the Parbatia, the Raidongia, the Chamua, Tamuli and Jigiri Kunwaris etc. The first three had high status.

\(^54\) The second part of the Fathiyah-i-Ibriyah by Shihabuddin Talish, gives a comprehensive account of Assam, the government and the people during Jayadwaj Singha's rule.

It is difficult to disagree with Wade. Any way, it clearly indicates the relative strength and weakness of the system particularly as far as the growth and stability of the state are concerned. What compelling circumstances were behind its developments, how it sustained such a long period, and how it collapsed like a house of cards at one stroke of the Moamoria rebellion never to recuperate again, are the issues to be looked for. The complexities are enormous, perhaps a search may be made from the beginning of the end of the state.

This leads us to the Moamoria rebellion to see what has been in order to understand what it was.

It appears that the system as a whole worked under strong rulers, who could vigorously put the investments in irrigated agriculture and other constructive works leading to the strengthening of their regimes, while at the same time keeping their military capacity in tact. As such, the outcome was a sort of 'Oriental Despotism', the characteristic feature of which was a highly centralised political system. Its success invariably depended upon strong and energetic rulers. Its roots were essentially in the hydra-lic culture to be backed by a strong army. Such was the course of the development of Mughal India, so was the case...
with the Ahoms in Assam. In fact, in all such 'Oriental Despotisms' in medieval India, artificiality was the rule rather than an exception which Wade has seen through his occidental eyes.

The Ahom state sprang up as a direct result of conquests of large territories. In the wake of this, the old gentile constitution underwent several changes and modifications under changed territorial and conquest society situations since rule over the subjugated became incompat-ible with the gentile order. 56 This was done during the reigns of Suhummung Dihingia Raja (1497–1539), Sushengpha Pratap Singha (1603–1641) and finally during the reign of Sukhrungpha Rudra Singha (1696–1714) under compelling circum-
stances while still keeping in tact the 'Oriental Despotic' character. This could continue for centuries because the conquests did not necessitate either a serious struggle with the conquered population or a more advanced division of labour as both the conquerors and the conquered were in the same level of economic development. So the economic basis of the society remained the same. 57

57 Ibid., p. 166.
On the other hand, to reconcile the possible antagonisms within the ruling families, the war benifices were distributed among the lineage-based kin-group members, giving way to the rise of great aristocratic families with privileges and powers, who at times made mockery of the Ahom civil constitution particularly under weak and callous rulers, unmistakably demonstrating the artificiality of the Ahom political system beyond doubt. But the same constitution witnessed a regularity and precision under strong rulers with charismatic dispositions. Thus the Ahom civil constitution as seen by Wade and further analysed by Guha (see FN 52 in this chapter) did not shake off its tribal character and it remained more or less the same up to the Ahom rule. While the feudalistic elements continued to grow under varying circumstances with much rapidity at times, to hold on to the unequal access to the resources exclusively in the interest of the ruling class, the gradually emerging detribalised population under Hindu impact continued to struggle to yoke off from the obnoxious pyke system. Nevertheless, there were occasional rejuvenations at the initial stage of the Ahom state building process through an

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52 This was particularly seen during the period of weak and inefficient rulers (1623-1681 & 1744-1769) and thereafter. Sometimes the aristocracy completely usurped power, the king becoming a mere puppet in their hands.
Ahomisation process. This explains the feudal-tribal contradictions which were concomitantly at the root of some social contradictions and antagonisms, in the reconciliation of which, perfectly or imperfectly, fully or partly, the Ahom state had emerged.

Another significant aspect which is apparently discernible in the Ahom system was that the pykes were neither 'slaves' nor 'free man'. Moreover, the concept of Ahom feudalism differs with that of the Western feudalism considerably (see Chapter V). In Ahom's case, it was not the 'land and its boundary' which counted much. But it was the access to the 'man-power' which signified the material resources. Hence, it is peculiar that the Ahom system contained the elements of private property in the possession of the 'human resources' rather than of 'land resources'. Therefore, the artificiality in the Ahom system was somewhat contentious within the system. Thus the contradictions were writ large in it.

But no society, for any length of time, can remain master of its own system and continue to dominate over the social effects. Hence, Ahomisation was replaced by Hinduisation under pressing circumstances. Hinduisation being a civilising process, had an influential role in the detribalisa-
tion process too. At first, the sole interest of the ruling class to Hindu culture was one of patronizations to sanctify the legitimacy of the Ahom despotism, because Hinduism also contained the elements of feudalism in exploiting the passive common masses through proselytization. Therefore, Guha finds an apparent collaboration between the two. Later on, when ramifications took place within Hinduism in the wake of the neo-Vaishnavite movement, the rulers got entangled in that insoluble contradictions between the Bhakti and Shakti cults and the Ahom autocracy leaned towards Shaktism, since Bhaktism became a populist movement leading to mass detribalizations through the agency of the Kala-Sambati order of the Moamoria. In this way, being perplexed at the enormous complexities and the new dimensions and failing to find an alternative ideological solution, the Ahom authoritarianism resorted to 'patronise and persecute' means like the one of a 'divide and rule', as someone might say.

Any way, the feudal decadence of the Ahom state was complete and full by the time Moamoria rebellion broke out. This can be best illustrated from the statement of the king

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Gaurinath Singha to Welsh when he said, "any man who can pick up a hundred deep rate followers set himself up as a Raja." This requires no more substantiation. Both Mughal India and Ahom Assam had contemporaneous similar developments in politico-economic sphere in the 18th century. Both failed to strike a reconciliation between the forces of modernising trends and traditionalism; got caught in a whirlpool, and in the camouflage, they lost themselves.

There is no doubt that the Moamoria uprising was one of the greatest upheavals in medieval Assam. It could have taken a turn like the one in England, the Glorious Revolution. Be that as it may, since it does not fall within the purview of our thematic study, we would refrain from going into its details.

However, all these mark a significant transitional stage in the Ahom state. The Moamoria phenomenon was just a process on the way to civilization and the 'moving spirit' of civilization.

60 Bengal Political Consultation 1792; No. 47; Welsh to Cornavallis, Nov. 27; cited by H.K. Barpujari, n. 43, April, 1985, p. 87

61 See Amalendu Guha, n. 42, H.K. Barpujari & Maheswar Neog, n. 43, for further details.

The Marxist approach to depict the Moamoria rebellion as 'Class war' has produced further in-depth studies from Barpujari and Neog as above. While not totally denying the relevance of the Marxist approach, Neog and Barpujari have their own reservations. To us, it appears that the Moamoria phenomenon goes far beyond the realms of human complexities which only the state could have held, and thus, it marks the beginning and the end of the state.
tion, according to Engels, 'has been the naked greed to amass wealth, to gain prestige, power and status with utter selfishness and 'brutal sensuality', as the open distinguishing traits. No wonder, the state encompassed all such phenomena - the destroying of civilization for civilization's sake. By any standard, the Msooria rebellion was of uncommon magnitude in self destruction and fratricidal. No one won, no one lost, but 'those who paid the cost are rarely those who reaped the benefits', once again revealing the truth that 'History is about the most cruel of all goddesses, and she leads her triumphal car over the heaps of corpses' and the state being the product of human civilization sanctions all these.

63 Ibid., p. 98, see for the term 'brutal sensuality'. It appears strikingly apt in case of Raghava's attempt to acquire hundred wives which included all the wives of the former Ahom officers, the nobility and even including the king, after capturing power.
65 Ibid., citing Engels from Letter of February 24, 1893, to Danielson in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Correspondence 1846-1895 (1934), p. 510.