Chapter IV
THE PERSPECTIVES

Assam: the Demographic Context

From the pre-historic times, Assam has become the home of different migrating groups of people from the Northeast, Northwest and the West representing different cultural forms. The earliest migrants must have been the Bodo-Kacharis as the toponomical evidence in naming the rivers with the prefix 'Di' suggests.¹ Their characteristic features point to their Mongolicoid origin and in all probability, they might have been in the primitive subsistence economy stage, still nomadic in nature. The monolithic megalithic and cultural-anthropologic evidences indicate their long stay in Assam in a widely scattered manner.² The epigraphic and puranic sources mention the geographical names of Pragjyotisha, Kamarupa, Kamakhya with a fairly settled population as the legends of the time subscribe. However, the pre-historic migrations and movements are uncertain and cannot be said anything definitely except as instinctive historical propositions.

Distinct historical evidences appear about the kingdom of Kamarupa onward the 5th century A.D. The kingdom definitely flourished with name and fame, peace and prosperity during the rule of the Varman dynasty. The Aryan Hindu-Brahmanic penetration into Assam is noticed from this time onward as the various inscriptions and grants of the Kamarupa rulers would suggest. According to Puri, with its richness in wood and some plants in the hilly tracts of Kamarupa, Assam attracted members of the Brahma community in large numbers, and it came to be known as the land of sacrifices. The Brahmana missions now attached Kshatriya or high status to the ruling family by inventing fictitious descent from the Hindu legends of divine origin for them and in return, for their own gains. Under the influence of the Brahmins, the Kamarupa rulers assumed very high sounding titles and in keeping with this, Arya-Medha sacrifices were also performed. This trend of Sanskritizing the rulers continued throughout the medieval period of Assam.

After the Pala dynasty, the history of Kamarupa recedes into obscurity. Kamarupa was too much occupied with North-Indian politics. The rulers idealised more of moral grandeur, especially in their administration of Assam.

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3 B.N. Puri, Study in the Early History and Administration of Assam, Guwahati University, 1958, p. 7.  
4 S.K. Chatterjee, The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India, Guwahati University, 1970, p. 15.  
5 B.N. Puri, op. 3, p. 58.
and fame than of engaging themselves in the intricacies of the state building processes. Therefore, the cause of the disappearance of the kingdom of Kamarupa was that it failed to build up a system of centralised polity in an Aryan-non-Aryan syndrome through a viable productive economy. Thus the political vacuum left by the Kamarupa rulers was picked up by the Ahoms in the thirteenth century.

Assam continued to receive the waves of Tai migrants from the beginning of the thirteenth century. In the wake of the Muslim invasions, she also embraced the people of Islamic culture some of whom made Assam their home. Medieval Assam, thus produced a cultural syndrome of different groups of people, at once kaledoscopic in its demographic context. Transculturation, followed by a surface assimilation emanated from one universal need of economic and protective security which Assam provided with her abundantly rich vegetation and fertile soil.

Assam: the Geographical Context

The epigraphic and the Puranic sources and the heritage of Kamarupa, point to the fact that geographically, Assam belonged to India. Because of her geographical location, Assam provided the greatest migration routes of mankind. Assam provided the access to Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan in the north, valleys of the Ganges and its tributaries in the west, and
and also provided the naval communications through the Brahmaputra river to the south, and finally to the two Assamo-Burma routes; one being in the northeast leading from the Margherita-Chita-Ledo area to China through the Patkai ranges and the Hukawng valley in Burma, and the other through Manipur and Kachar in the southeast. Because of this geographical situation, the different migrating groups came more closer to the ruling families of the Brahmaputra valley rather than to their original home states. As a result, the Assamo-Burma route continued for trade purpose as well. According to Changkien,\(^6\) there was a regular land route between Assam and China through Upper Burma and Yunnan. Southeast Asian and Chinese contacts came through this route in subsequent periods. Thus the Patkai range in the extreme east of Assam form the natural boundary between India and Burma-China.\(^7\)

Geographically, Assam presents two landscapes, the hills and the plains. The plain areas embrace the fertile Brahmaputra and the Barak valley, while the hill areas embrace the Assamo-Burmese hills in the east and southeast, and the slopes of Assam plateau hills in the south. In short, mountains and

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\(^6\) Purin, p.6.

\(^7\) Chatterjee, p.4, p.6.
hills occupy more than half of the entire area. The important point in this geographical contrast, is the apparent distinction between the populations marked by occupational and socio-economic differences. People in the plains were wet rice agriculturists with a somewhat developed and advanced type social conditions, while the hill peoples were hoe farmers, socially clanish, with a crude type tribal system. Of all these, the Brahmaputra valley alone occupies a conspicuous place in the history of medieval Assam. It is here that all the dramatic conflicts and all the significant events in the political life of the peoples took place and sometimes resolved. It is here that all the various states of the Chutiya, Ahoms and Kacharis etc. emerged and it is here that the assimilation of all the ethnic elements culminating into a synthesis of an integrated nation, under the Ahom hegemony, gave birth to.

Perhaps, to this, the river Brahmaputra has the greatest contribution. The mighty river, with its many tributaries on both the banks, overflowing horizontally from east to west, cutting across the main landscape of the plains, is subject to annual and regular high floods. The alluvial deposits carried by its tributaries on both sides of the river, have made the extensive tracts extremely fertile with rich vegetation and most suitable for agricultural and pastoral

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occupations. But the climate is damp, soft, enervating and relaxing. It produces a strong tendency towards physical laxity marking a characteristic laziness in the inhabitants after a long period of stay.\textsuperscript{9} Thus the inoffensiveness and simplicity in them are the salutary results. Only the ruling classes were addicted to wars, rapine, torture and cruelty\textsuperscript{10} which the general masses endured assiduously. Whether it were the Bodo-Kacharis, the Ahoms or the other groups of people, who migrated into this enchanting land, their long stay in it, has made them soft and kindly in their outlook and dispositions.

Integration and Inter-ethnic Relations

The concept of social life is wide and rests on broad dimensions. It differs in different disciplines. It is integration in political science, assimilation in sociology and it primarily deals with the plural societies in anthropology. The historian's job is to lay bare the processes of social changes. In doing so, an open way has to be followed. Firstly, to see as to how the existing political systems function; secondly, how these systems assume new functions as a consequence of economic and other developments. The measuring

\textsuperscript{9}Galit,n.1,p.7.

\textsuperscript{10}J.D. Anderson, in "Introduction" to S. Endle's, The Kachari, Cosmo Publications, Delhi, 1977, p.xviii.
device to trace the changes in range and form, include, the intensity of co-operation and communication both of material objects and of services, and also of intellectual or emotional values. The interactions so arising may be contemporary, territorial and integrational as well, in historical terms. 11

There are three criteria, generally adopted, in looking into the processes and degree of integration in changing political systems. These are, 'transaction flows', 'functional interdependency' and 'congruency values'. 'Transaction flow' is a geographical concept. It refers to the amount and nature of interaction between various segments of a population within or between political systems. The units of analysis are generally the goods, persons and messages. The anthropologists evolved the concept of 'functional interdependency'. It originates with Durkheim's division of labour, based on reciprocality and specialisation. 'Congruency values' refer to a sense of common identity binding people together. It is mostly concerned with the birth of new states. But the anthropologists are silent as to what sort of common value orientations bring people together or what sort of compromises and adjustments has to be made by the social groups which forms the part of a larger system in the emerging new state. 12

12 Ibid., p. 6.
whether integration theory deals with any one of these aspects or with all, it is specifically related to new nation states. However, there are states or other social formations in which constituent parts remain divided, but yet form a coherent unit in the emerging polity with some form of ethnic identity and congruence values. 13

The Ahom state witnessed varying conditions on its way to statehood with so many variants. Some of them have been mentioned earlier in the chapters. It is a fact that the emerging society in the Ahom state was destined to be multi-ethnic with the juxtaposition of the different segments of the total population. As the basic ingredients of the state, the multi-ethnicity centred round the co-related socio-political and economic factors in which one ethnic group was dominating over another. Such being the case, the Ahom state emerged as an organ of social integration on an identical socio-cultural level, and of internal regulation for promotion of wet rice agriculture and thereby securing surplus productions through the ryote system and finally of external defence against the Mughals.

13 By the end of the 17th century, the Ahom state transformed itself into a greater Assamese state based more on linguistic assimilation for all practical purposes. Yet, the different constituent segments, viz., the Bhuyans, Koch-Kacharis, Moran-Borahi-Chutiyas including the Ahoms and the Assamized Musalmans continued to maintain some of their cultural and ethnic identities. In the Indian context too, it is the same situation perhaps; the concept of 'unity in diversity' is more related here. However, the role of a common language amongst diverse ethnic groups in the formation of new states, has not yet been brought into focus.
The level of integration took shape at first with the Ahomisation process followed by Hinduisation/Sanskritization or say Assamization with the extension of political boundaries and incorporation of more divergent population. It became an instrument of integrating a number of communities. Added to this was the ability of the Ahoms to identify themselves with their new institutional environment which largely determined the formative stage of the Ahom state. The stimulation came from the fertility of the soil and its ecology and the ethnic compatibility. This was backed by the potentials of successful military exploits.

The form of integration emanated from the same interest of the conquerors and the conquered when large areas of thick forested marshy lands were opened up and land reclamation began on mass communal basis. Sympathy and a sense of common service gradually appeared. Each other's common humanity was realised and recognised.

On the religious plane, the Ahom religion being in a rhapsodic state was in an identical level with the local segments except the mainstream of the Assamese speaking caste Hindu population. Since the Ahom social system admitted no inhibitions and taboos on commensality and connubium, the integration on social level was smooth and simple. Later on,

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14 See FN 45, elsewhere in this chapter.
when the new Vaishnavite renaissance took place, the Ahoms equally responded to its concept of unity and oneness in one single omnipotent power, i.e., Ek deva, Ek seva, Ek Bine Nahl Keva. This concept was rather politicised by the ruling Ahoms with the ideology of one people under one monarch in keeping with the feudal characteristics of the Ahom system. Because, 'neo-Vaishnavism' was essentially a feudal ideology that was helping detribalisation of the society in transition. Later events prove this fact. The organisation and management of the Vaishnavite Satras clearly manifest such feudalistic cults.

The existing political systems in Assam were to be found in the typical states of the Chutiyas, Kacharis, Koches and in the loose confederation of the petty Bhuyan chiefs - the offshoot of the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa. The state system

16 *Basically, religious in form and content, the Vaishnavite movement was the first of its kind bringing about tremendous upheavals in the socio-cultural and religious life in the Ahom state. It became a popular movement so much so that it paved the way for the emergence of a new Assamese society, and it is in this context, it might be termed as 'renaissance'. Otherwise, it was no more than a caste Hindu movement against Brahmanical excesses in the name of religion, which could not betray its feudalistic tendencies leading to the polarisation of the society on caste basis as demonstrated by later developments. On the whole, the changes have been well observed by Guha, 'The Ahoms were accepted as a low-ranking new Hindu peasant caste. The tribal neophytes, admitted first to the lowest rung of the ladder, ..., individuals and groups did not only move from animism to Vaishnavism, but also from tribes to peasant castes; ...' See Amalendu Guha, *Neo-Vaishnavism to Insecurity: Peasant Uprisings and the Crisis of Feudalism in Late 19th Century Assam*, Occasional Paper No. 87, CSSS, Calcutta, 1984, p. 5.

of the migrant Ahoms represented a hierarchically organised highly centralised polity with stratifications in form and frame. In course of time, the Ahoms subjugated all these groups and put them into the orbit of their political system. In the Ahom system, private property rights over wet rice lands were not recognised. Such rights were vested in the community represented by the king. Every household possessed three kinds of lands redistributed from time to time. Forests and marshes were the common lands of the villagers.\footnote{Ibid, p.7.} Such a system in the socio-economic sphere produced no serious antagonisms and contradictions; on the other hand, it strengthened the integrative forces in an oceanic level. Agriculture was in multifarious forms. Both shifting and settled agricultural societies existed side by side. Population-wise, the Assamese speaking Hindu mainstream and the Ahoms were literate, used the plough and lived in politically organised societies. The remaining population was just tribal with diverse languages and were associated with swidden cultivation with the exception of few plains Kachari segments using the plough. The Ahoms, the tribals and the Assamese speaking Hindu population remained segregated in isolated pockets which were then in an uneven stage of development.\footnote{Ibid, p.6.} When the...
Ahom government widely scattered the divergent population for administrative reasons and when the Assamese language emerged as the only link language as a means of communication, the segregation broke off.

A commonplace epithet generally applied to the Ahoms is, Sat Raj Mari Ek Raj Kora, which means that the Ahoms by doing away with seven different principalities, uniting them under one common flag, created one unified state. This happened with active royal patronisation of the language and culture as well as religion and polity of the locals. Further, the society had small dimensions, both territorial and demographic and the density of the population was also low. The sub-units of the population were juxtaposed to one another on each occasion of their subjugations. They were then widely scattered throughout the state. The result was the emergence of an entirely new society. A highly centralised political organisation was the logical outcome of such factors.

The segregation as well as the isolation of the different social groups were slowly disappearing. It advanced in two ways. Firstly, the Ahom leadership ensured the agricultural surplus leading to perfect economic security, and secondly, the defence of the territory from foreign invasions was put forth as the basic ideology. The state became a necessity to perform the dual function at the initial stage. This was done through a process of integration of the different segments leading to
formal structural changes in the birth of a hierarchically ranked bureaucracy in which local talents and know-how were accommodated. This usually happens when in a particular locality, a political system composed of equititarian lineage segments is replaced by a ranked hierarchy of the feudal type. Meanwhile, the nuong, the Ahom territorial concept, extended from the Dikhow valley up to the Phandiri valley and finally up to the Korotoya river in the west. Thus both internal and external factors contributed to the territorial as well as to the ethnical integration as a whole. Here the ruling class interest further consolidated the feudalistic cults by channelising the integrated population into the Pyke system which became the sole agency for all sorts of exploitations, particularly for securing more agricultural surplus, in which the broad agri-based society was rooted.

The process itself, produced a peasant class in the common level of the totality, where the entire Ahom system of polity, economy, and the society rested. How it served the ruling class interest may be seen from the Chinese legalists' view. That if the attention of the population is devoted to agriculture, they would remain simple and they would be easier to correct. Being perplexed, they would be easier to direct and being trustworthy, they may be used for defence

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and warfare. The people would continue to love their rulers and would obey their commands, even to death, if they are engaged in farming day and night. Such instances are not lacking in Ahom's case and we need not put the list of evidence here. Any way, this completes the picture of the Ahom feudal complex and the agricultural society.

Marriage and Integration

The problem of political incorporation arises when a highly centralised hierarchical system of administration like that of the Ahoms is being established over peoples of diverse culture with some groups in a fairly advanced and some other still in a lower form of civilisation. Again, the problem becomes more complex, where in an area, migrations either forced or free have been continuing from time to time and finally again, when within diverse social groups, the process of internal differentiation constantly appears.

The Ahoms were migrants. So also the Bhuyans and other segments of the Hindu population who migrated earlier. The great Bodo-Kachari peoples were the earliest migrants, who were in transition from an acephalous to that of chiefdom type state. The Morans and Borahis too, were no exceptions. The

21 Barrington Moore, Jr., Political Power and Social Theory, Six Studies, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958, p. 51.
juxtaposition of such ethnic groups of diverse nature, concomitantly, led to the establishment of some sort of relationship of friendship, of antagonism or usually a mixture of both. In such a situation, there appears no problem of incorporation, absorption or assimilation of the migrants into a single political system, in any way.

In all migratory movements, three aspects are discernible. Firstly, the initiating factor - the motivation; secondly, the nature of migration process itself, and thirdly, the absorption of the migrants. Here our main concern is with the Ahom migrants. As regards the motive and the nature of their migrations, we have already mentioned it in the earlier chapters. Therefore, we would confine ourselves with the third aspect - that a group of Tais, in search of a new home, established themselves in an alien land through conquests and gave birth to a new society, a new nation. In course of time, they themselves were absorbed by the receiving society. Here the respective social structures, between the Ahom migrants and other receiving groups became fundamentally important for building up the state edifice.

The Ahoms had a system of centralised polity. It was internally stratified. It had the characteristics of a secondary state. The access to kingship and other major offices of the state were limited to a minority ruling group. At first, they created a conquest society in Upper Assam similar to a
colonial variant in which the wars, conquests and absorptions of the subjugated groups played a major role. Later on, when the expansion of the territory went on along with consolidation and the Ahom's acceptance of the land as their permanent home, it took a national turn. The net outcome was more centralisation of authority and more stratifications in the growing social formations. The Ahoms, as the new migrants, continued to hold the reins of authority.

In course of time, the centralisation of authority gained more ground and in the resultant stratifications, the ruling group became separated and placed themselves above the totality. The Ahom rulers thus encouraged their own subjects for adoption of local language and culture in the interest of the ruling class as well as that of the state. One important factor in the absorptions of the migrants by the receiving societies was the language factor which not only brought the territorial unity of the emerging state but also created a common unifying bond in the entire society at large.

However, we have to admit that there is no known law, a rule or a method or any system by which the direction of the linguistic changes could be determined especially in a conquest society. Variables such as political dominance,
numbers, sex ratios, inter-marriages, usages, and self images are there, but not to the relationship between them. The political dominance alone cannot determine the acceptance of one's language. In spite of this political dominance, the Ahoms failed to impose their language on the subjugated population. It was because of the historical process. The commoner Ahoms who accompanied Sukapha mostly consisted of males. They doubtless took their women from the local groups giving rise to the 'mother tongue' problem. Perhaps, the oft repeated statement that the Ahoms did not bring their families at the time of their coming to Assam holds good to a great extent in this context. But the same cannot be said of the ruling Ahom elite, mainly consisting of the king and the chiefs including the priestly class who accompanied Sukapha. On the contrary, most of them came with their families and marriages were more or less confined within these families as far as practicable. There was no sign of radical changes in the language and culture of the Ahom nobility. Whether it is in the Chaklans marriage or in the issue of Copper Plate grants, the

22 p. Gogoi, The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms, C.U., 1968, p. 256. Sukapha himself brought three wives, one of which was his chief queen, the daughter of a noble Thamung Kanggan. Gogoi says, 'There followed in the wake of the marching army parties of sturdy and adventurous village folk, men, women and children from various places along the route'. It is also likely that the other chiefs too brought their wives. Gogoi further says, 'All these chiefs and nobles cast in their lot with Neo-Kam Nagas and quit their countries for good and therefore could not have left their families behind the mercies of their enemies'.

Ghia also says, 'though the chronicles do not mention so, we may presume that many of them were accompanied by their women as well... otherwise most of them would not have retained their original speech almost to the end of the 17th century'. See Amalendu Guha, Ahom Political system... etc., p. 39.
Ahom language and culture were invariably in use up to the last days of the Ahom rule. Thus the major social transformations in the Ahom state came not from the top but from the bottom; a fact generally overlooked.

Marriage as a social institution has the deepest impact on the social changes. Progress of mankind has depended to a significant measure upon the substitution of marrying-out for killing-out. Every marriage by implication is a political act. Thus the political value of inter-marriages always remains. Matrimonial alliances increase friendship and understanding more than anything else. The meaning of marriage

23 King Chandra Kanta Singha (1810-1818), issued one copper plate grant to Hukimath temple establishments at Biswanath, in modern Sonitpur district of Assam. The plate is in Ahom language on one side and Assamese/Sanskrit mixed on the other. See the article in Assamese by Nityananda Gogoi, "Biswanath Kshetra Tamas Phali", in: Prakash, 7th Issue, 10th year, April, 1985, p. 66.

24 With the appearance of the state, the connotation of the term 'Ahom' terminates somewhere between the 'ruling Ahoms' and the 'commoner Ahoms' who got just submerged in the common level of the totality. It was this section of the Ahom people, on whose debris, the tremendous social transformations were rooted; the 'Ahomness' being transformed into 'Assameseness'. Thus in the currents of the social transformations, whether it was in the sphere of culture and language or religion, or for that matter any other issue, the commoners' contribution is inmeasureable. The ruling class, true to their character, mostly adhered to the torture, rapine and cruelty, whenever their interest to holding on to 'power' demanded.

policy is expressed in concrete terms in the maxim:

Then we will give our daughters unto you, and we will take your daughters to us, and we will dwell with you, and we will become one people.26

The marriage policy of the Ahoms was of similar nature. We have already noted some of its consequences and to add further:

Ahoms, Morans, Borahis and Chutiyas had all been undergoing a process of merger into a larger community through free inter-marriages and the ongoing acculturation for many centuries. In that process all the four tribes had lost much of their separate identities, even before their coming into the fold of Hinduism.27

Political incorporation is a complex issue. In acephalous societies, it tantamounts to mere cultural assimilation. But in a conquest situation within a plural society, the polities of the different groups move towards to some form ecumenical entity through partial consent and then through some cultural assimilation. When the Ahom kingdom expanded territorially, the former independent political units, after their subjugations, were incorporated into the larger political system of the Ahoms. The process took about four centuries, especially after the Assamese language became the lingua franca and also after successful repulsion of Muslim invasions during the period and afterwards. The Ahom

26 Ibid, p.139. The maxim is of Muhammad in Israelite history.

27 Azmalendu Guha, n.16, p.44.
political hegemony was an established fact by the end of the seventeenth century which was accepted by all unquestionably.

The highly centralised polity of the Ahoms continued. At the apex of the system was the mystically identified heavenly king 'swargadev' having unlimited power but to some extent, limited by the three 'Great Gohains'. The distant dominions were administered by the appointed officials from amongst the nobles as his representatives. The administrative set up consisted of a gradation of officials forming a monopolised hierarchical patrimonial bureaucracy. The structure of the polity thus, fully revealed the feudal characteristics. The institutionalisation of the khels and mels, and also the privileges and perquisites of the nobility in the form of bilats, largely confirm this. The society was now clearly marked by two distinct classes - the 'rulers' and the 'ruled'.

This political strength of the central government determined the cultural uniformity of the different political units with the expansion of the territory and with the incorporations at each stage, the means of livelihood of the incorporated groups, more or less, being the same with the

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rulers. The centralised authority and the feudal type administration provided the ground to accommodate the culturally diverse groups within a single political system.

We have earlier noted the role of the Assamese language as a common factor of communication and the effects of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in this context. We once again quote Guha, to draw upon the wider perspectives of the issues so involved.

During the 14th-15th centuries, however, the Assamese language took a definite shape... The next two centuries saw a popular neo-Vaishnavite reformation and literary-cultural upsurge all over Assam which coincided with simultaneous abridgement of its political fragmentation. The Vaishnavite monasteries accepted royal patronage, extended their proselytizing activities also to tribal and Tai-Ahom people and eventually brought them all within the fold of a single language... The cult of bhakti indirectly promoted also bhakti to the reigning monarch who patronised this order. In fact, after the expulsion of the Mughal invaders by 1682, almost the entire Assamese people became politically and culturally consolidated under the Tai-Ahoms... they remained so down to the British take over of 1826.

Detribalisation or peasantization and feudal consolidation were the two main perspectives emanating out of such factors.

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29 Anindita Guha, Nationalism: Pan-Indian and Regional in a Historical Perspective, Presidential Address in Section III: Modern Indian History, of the 44th Session of the Indian History Congress, Burdwan, December, 1983, p. 20.
Behind Religion and Rituals

It is difficult to give a definition of religion which would be at once acceptable to all. To some, it is a way of life; to some other, it is related to the understanding of the mystery of the universe and its creations and to find an answer to man's transmigrational questions. When and at what point of time, religion came to have an overbearing influence on mankind bringing about so many contradictions; why men so dogmatically adhere to the religious tenets with unfathomable beliefs, is equally difficult to say. Protohistoric primitive men worshipped whatever they found useful and helpful to human living. Religion appeared in its animistic form with intrinsic faith in the actions of the supernaturals which were usually regarded as true and sacred. In course of time, with the progress of human society in its socio-economic fields, this animism got philosophised. To assert this, men resorted to elaborate rituals. Thus religion became a unified system of beliefs and practices relating to things sacred which were placed above and separated from all other things being protected by interdictions. Religion thus provided the systems of symbols which in turn produced the consciousness of the society itself. Social life became impossible without a vast symbolism.
Social and moral interests became inseparable with religious interests through such symbolic forms.  

The point could be well illustrated from the chronicles of the Ahoms. The chronicles mention, amongst others, the celebrations of the two rituals of Rikkan and Me-Dam-Meo-phi on number of occasions. Such celebrations were meant to secure social control for solidarity, vitality and life force in the national life. Rikkan is more closely related to the three original principles of Taoism, namely, essence, vital force and spirit while Me-Dam-Meo-phi is a form of ancestor worship to secure blessings from the forefathers for success and happiness in life. Rikkan was first celebrated on a state level during the reign of Subhasaung Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) after his conspicuous victory over the Chutiyas and then after defeating the Kacharis. Subhasaung Gargayan Raja (1539-1552) performed both Rikkan and Me-Dam-Meo-phi after the victory over the Mussalmans and the Kacharis and after conclusion of peace with the Koches. Susengpha Pratap Singha (1603-1641) performed the Me-Dam-Meo-phi after the disaster with the Kacharis and before going

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31 A hom B uran, tr. G.C. Barua etc., p. 58, 60, 66.
32 Ibid, p. 73.
33 Ibid, p. 77.
34 Ibid, p. 86.
to war with the Mussalmans in 1616 A.D. and performed both ḍikkhā and Me-Dam-Ne-Phi after victory over the Mussal-
man. ḍikkhā and Me-Dam-Ne-Phi was again performed after the Ahom defeat in the battle of Hajo in 1618 A.D. against the
Mussalmans.

Onward the reign of Sutamla Jayachewaj Singha (1648-1663),
the performing of these rites receded as a result of increas-
ing Brahmanical influence. The process started even during
Sushengpha Pratap Singha's reign when in 1628, offerings
were made to the Brahmins instead performing these ancient
rites.

Inspite of the growing Hindu influence and the receding
trend in the observance of these ancient Ahom rites, a
significant episode took place during the reign of
Gupungmung Chakradhowaj Singha (1663-1669) when he decided to
perform such ancient rite to wipe out the Mughal domination.
The chronicle mentions:

... the king held a council with the three Dangarias
and other high officials, addressing them the king said,
"my brother, Chaopha Shutamla did not make any offer to
our forefathers. He also did not offer sacrifices to
Indra and all other gods, so the Mussalmans could come
to our country and devastate the province. The Karis and
the Bahas were massacred and all people suffered great
misery. Now I wish to propitiate the Indra and other
gods by offering sacrifices and to make offerings to
forefathers. The people at large should be collected
(emphasis ours) and offerings should be made. I wish to
free myself from the subjugation of the Mussalmans.

I think I shall be successful in the attempt. I wish to know your opinion." The Baragohain said in reply, "In the ancient time, your forefathers used to do the same thing when they were overtaken by such misfortune. They thus regained their former powers. Your proposal is really praiseworthy." So it was usually performed before facing or after overcoming an external crisis. Thus the purpose of such ritual celebrations indicates more than what it religiously meant. It hints further more of political socialisation at a critical moment in a nation's life than merely performing an ancient rite.

It is not the fact that the Ahom defeat in the hands of the Mughals was due to the non-adherence to such ancient rites. The reason might be more than this, or else, we find that before undertaking the operations against the Mughals, Chakradhwaj Singha invited the Mahantas and other orders and got performed a Yajna by them at Galpughat (present Paka Ghat at Sibsagar) and made presents to them. Similarly, after recovering Guwahati, another Yajna was performed at Biswanath (in Sonitpur District). Therefore, perhaps the undercurrent lying at the root of all such ancient ritual celebrations might be due to the declining martial odour of the Ahoms, arising apparently, out of the Hinduisational process which became egregious during the reign of Supatpha Gadadhar Singha (1661-1696).

42 P. Gogoi, n. 22, p. 461.
However, it is difficult to say exactly or conclusively as to the religion of the Ahoms. By any standard, the religion of the Ahoms was in a flux, in a rhapsodic state. Moreover, the Ahom monarchs had no serious concern for religion. Therefore, a secular outlook is discernible in their religious outlook. To be more precise, a sense of social casuistry pervaded through their religious attitudes. This explains the absence of communal religious clashes in the Ahom state and even after.

43 Scholars are not unanimous with regard to the religious culture of the Ahoms. Jila Gogoi says that the Taiks accepted Buddhism (but did not give up many of the Tao rites and customs) before their advent to Assam and that the Ahoms were in the first stage of Buddhism. He has forcefully argued by citing specific and definite traces in this context. See, Che-Rai-Doi, a souvenir publication of the Ne-Dam-Me-Phi celebration committee, Sibsagarh, January, 1985, pp. 4-5.

Hiteswar Barbarua, p. 389, also says that the Ahoms followed Buddhism. Padmeswar Gogoi too speaks of Buddhist influence but his contention is that the religious beliefs of the Ahoms is based on supernatural powers, formless spirits, Nata as they are called in Burmese with rice, eggs, flowers and sometimes animal sacrifices; see Tai-Ahom Religion and Custom, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1976, p. 12.

S. J. Periwiel, on the other hand, has outrightly rejected all such propositions by saying that "all the available evidence points to the idea that this religion is to be regarded as a branch of the old Tai religion and that label should suffice to identify it"; see The Tai of Assam and Ancient Tai Ritual, Centre for SEAS, Gaya, 1981, Vol. I, pp. 45-46.

Amalendu Bhattacharya is also of similar opinion when he compares the spirit of the Tai-Ahom religious cult - a form of animatism tinged with elements of ancestor worship - with that of degenerated Tantric-Buddhist and tribal fertility rites. See, n. 16, p. 7.

Our observations are largely based on this.
Tracing the element of social casuistry behind the celebrations of all such rituals and observance of the rites, usually before and after the external dangers, there is an apparent manifestation of an ideal of highest concern to the Ahom government, that is, the resistance to Muslim menace. The Ahoms took it seriously, considered it as the life and death question and as one of the sacred duties to be performed by the government. Altogether they fought as many as twelve battles during the course of one hundred and fifty years from Shumung Dihingia Raja to Supatpha Gadadhar Singha, displaying patriotic zeal, tenacity and perseverance, and the highest ideals of protecting the land, life and property of the people from the devastations of an alien menace, whom they termed as ‘Bangals’ - a concept which encapsulates the heart of every Assamese men, women and children of the land even to day.

Such principles were embedded in their very constitution, inherited from their proto-historic ancient heritage, when their ancestors Khunlung and Khunlai were given a ‘Code of Lengdon to be followed in the exercise of their sovereign powers. The Code specifically directed for protecting the life, property and chastity of the subject population and not to rule arbitrarily as they pleased.

44 Bangals means ‘foreigners’ and not ‘Bengalis’; see P. Gogoi, The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms ..., p. 443, who refuses to accept this interpretation, and says that “Bangals’ mean the Muslims whom no Assamese was allowed to imitate”.

45 Ibid., p. 121.
Besides, while ascending the singarighar or say in the coronation ceremony, the sovereign was profusely advised which may be compared to an oath taking ceremony of modern times:

Cherish and protect your subjects as your own children. Use spies to ascertain their actual conditions. Bring criminals to condemn and capital punishments. Nourish kins and Brahmans ... rely upon united deliberations of a single counsellor with yourself. Take prompt decisions on urgent and important matters. Let not the demands of equity be suppressed by dictates of injustice. The law of the land, institutions of state to be upheld. All cabals are to be suppressed ... Let not might prevail over right. 46

This sums up the role of the Ahom government, and the Ahom rulers could hardly ignore it. In fact, it is due to this character of the Ahom government that the repeated onslaughts of the Muslims could have been sustained. There is no dearth of data to prove this. 47 Therefore, it is no denying the fact that the Muslim invasions produced an accelerating factor on the way to a mature statehood instead of it becoming a retarding factor – a perspective of considerable dimensions, we might say.

47 Sushenpha Pratap Singha’s reconciliation with the Kachari king Shimbil Narayan in order to face the impending Muslim invasions, offering of an Ahom princess to the Mughals after the devastations of Mirjumla, Chakradhwaj Singha’s attempt to mobilise the whole state to wipe out Muslim domination, and finally, Radha Singha’s attempt at a harmonious Northeast against Muslim Bengal, are some of the examples to mention a few.