CHAPTER XII

Impact of Ahom Administration and Vaisnava movement on Assamese Character & Society.

1. Impact of Administration:

(a) Introduction:

For a high ethical standard, a strong and cultured mind, a healthy physique and a good environment are mainly responsible. We are proud of the fact that these elements which help the growth of a moral standard in a society, have been developing in the Medieval Assamese society under the care, guidance and protection of the great Vaisnava movement and the two royal powers, viz., the Ahoms and the Koch. But it must be admitted that the Koches politically became very weak just after the death of Nararayana towards the last of the 16th century and the Ahom rule entered into a period of chaos and confusion towards the last part of the 18th century. The Ahom administration galvanised the inhabitants of diverse racial strains into one nation infusing a strong spirit of nationality. The Ahom rule made the Assamese people dutiful, self-dependent, self-respectful and patriotic.

(b) Physical appearance and personality:

It is believed that personality has relation with physical appearance. Assam is the homeland of different racial strains and specially of the Mongolian stock. So, although there were Aryan inhabitants of a considerable number, yet, owing to the contact and admixture of blood, a change in their physiognomy is not an unnatural phenomenon. External appearance cannot give the accurate picture of the mind at all times. Behind the external peculiarities, which gave a false impression to the foreign writers, there were many good and rare qualities unrevealed to them. W. Robinson, discussing on the point, writes: "The people present several peculiarities of external form which it may be necessary to notice..... The Assamese have frequently
been described as degenerate and weakly race and in these respects inferior even to their effeminate neighbours the Bengalis; but as a general description, it does not accord with the true state of the case. Though certainly inferior to the people of the western provinces, yet in most points, they seem as much removed above those of Bengal. In complexion they are a shade or two lighter coloured than the Bengalis. Their persons are in general short, robust and active, when they choose to so; but devoid of that grace and flexibility, so peculiar to the Hindu. Their face flat, with high cheek bones, presents a physiognomy resembling the Chinese and suggesting no idea of beauty. Their hair is abundant, black, lank and coarse; but the beard is scanty and usually plucked out, which gives the men an effeminate appearance. But though these peculiarities are general, we must not omit to mention, that there are a few particular exceptions whose forms more properly belong to that variety termed by Blumenbach, the Caucesian and which includes also the inhabitants of Europe. But even from them, they were distinguished by a peculiar delicacy and exility of shape, suggesting the idea of a refined and even effeminate people. These exceptions are, however, to be met with only in the higher rank of life." ¹ No doubt, this is a true picture. The Ahoms and almost all those belonging to the Tibeto-Burman stock, do exactly agree with the description in appearance made above. The aristocratic class or rather the blue-blooded section of the Ahoms presents a healthy physique, tall and fair in complexion, but unbearded and flat faced. But the Aryan inhabitants are quite different and they agree with the Aryan inhabitants of other parts of India in appearance; but they are not so tall and fair in complexion. In the 'Alungirmarah', Mahammad Cazim gives a very grotesque description of the physique and character of the Ahoms, whom the Mohammedans generally met in the battle-field. It may
be that what they have seen of the Ahoms in the battle-field, was true, so far the Ahoms in the battle-field were concerned; but apart from the battle-field, in their actual life, they were not at all so base as described by Cazim. Cazim writes:

"They do not adopt any mode of worship practised either by the heathens or Mohamedans, nor do they concur in any of the known sects, which prevail amongst mankind. They are a base and unprincipled nation, and have no fixed religion. They follow no rule, but that of their own inclination and make the approbation of their own vicious minds, the test of the propriety of their actions. Their strength and courage are apparent in their looks, but their ferocious manners and brutal tempers are also betrayed by their physiognomy. They are superior to most nations in corporal force and hardy exertions. They are enterprising, savage, fond of war, vindictive, treacherous and deceitful. The virtues of compassion, kindness, friendship, sincerity, truth, honour, good faith, shame and purity of morals have been left out of their composition. The seeds of tenderness and humanity have not been sown in the field of their frames. The Rajahs of their country, have always raised the crest of pride and vein glory, and displayed an ostentatious appearance of grandeur and a numerous train of attendants and servants. They have not bowed the head of submission and obedience, nor have they paid tribute to the most powerful monarch; but they have curbed the ambition and checked the conquest of the most victorious princes of Hindusthan. The solution of difficulties, attending a war against them has baffled the penetration of heroes, who have been styled conquerors of the world."²

What is said by Cazim about the Assamese people is accurately true so far as their behaviour in the battle-field is concerned. The Assam kings and the Assamese people were not vainly but justly proud of the fact that they had never bowed their head in submission to any body. It is the Assam kings and the Assamese people, who could defiantly battle the successive attacks made by the mighty forces of the Mohamedane Emperors.
The Ahom kings, such as Shukapha, Shuhungmung, Shusenpha, Chakradhvaja Singh, Gadadhar Singha and Ruira Singha were all powerful kings with strong personalities and principles. We have discussed above that Sukapha, adopting the policy of sternness and conciliation, established a small kingdom in the east; the mighty Shuhungmung consolidated the Ahom power from Sadia in the east up to the Kochbehar in the west annexing and subjugating the territories of the Chutiás, the Kacháris, the Bhuyans and the Koches. King Shusenpha, alias Pratap Singh, with the help of his able and efficient minister Nomai Tamuli Barbarua, organised the whole country on a sound economic footing by introducing administrative reforms. It was as a result of the stern measures adopted by this king that the people became diligent, laborious, self-dependent and expert in manifold duties. That is why, the Assamese soldiers could show their efficiency at the time of war in whatever assignments they were placed. Having seen the efficiency of Assamese soldiers in different fields of activities, Ram Singh, the Mogul general, once remarked, "Every Assamese soldier is expert in rowing boats, in shooting arrows, in digging trenches and in wielding guns and canon. I have not seen such specimens of versatility in any other part of India." Further he exclaimed, "Glory to the King! Glory to the counsellors! Glory to the country! One single individual leads all the forces! Even I Ram Singh, being personally on the spot, have not been able to find out loophole and opportunity." Many such references can be cited from the chronicles to prove that the Assamese people at that time were very active and dexterous. Once, at the time of the battle at Sarighat, when by the execution of a wrong order from the king, ten thousand Assamese soldiers died in the battle at Alabai, Lackit Barphukan, the General of the Assam-force, cried out, "Each one of our soldiers is a pillar of strength; and I have lost ten thousand such stalwarts."
The Ahom kings could never tolerate the state of subordination to other powers. Having seen the plight of his dear country, King Jayadhvaja Singha's tears rolled down from his eyes. It is believed that the dishonour and disgrace and the intense sorrow brought by the sad and disastrous invasion of Mirjumla, cut short the life of King Jayadhvaja Singha. His successor, king Chakradhvaja Singha, after ascending the throne asked his cabinet ministers, nobles and officers of the Court to make the country free from the vassalage of the Moguls. He said, "My ancestors were never subordinate to any other people; and I for myself cannot remain under the vassalage of any foreign powers...... Death is preferable to a life of subordination to foreigners." King Rudra Singha was a most powerful and ideal king. It was he who completed the subjugation and subordination of all the frontier tribal kings of Assam and then marched forward with a vast army to conquer the whole of India; but unfortunately expired at Gauhati. His main intention was to re-capture the portion of ancient Kamarupa, called 'Ratnapitha', which was under the Mogul domination.

The nobles and high ranking officers of the Ahom kings were also men of great personality, intelligent, integrity, resolution and patriotism. They loved the country intensely; anybody who plotted against the country was considered a traitor and even his posterities were never believed. During the six hundred years of Ahom rule we come across two or three persons among the high officials who thus conspired against the throne. Among the nobles, there were shrewd statesmen whose far-sighted policies still deserve attention. Many of the Prime Ministers of the Ahom kings have left their glorious records. Amongst them Prime Minister Atan Buragohain
and Pumananda Buragohain deserve special mention. About Prime Minister, Atan Buragohain, Dr. S.K. Bhuyan writes: "Atan Buragohain Rajmantri Dangaria was the Prime Minister of Assam for more than seventeen years, from January, 1662 to March 1679. During this period, Assam passed through a series of crisis in the shape of foreign invasions and internal disruptions; and Atan Buragohain conducted the affairs with rare foresight, probity and judgement and disinterested patriotism. The versatile qualities of the Buragohain and the proofs that he gave of his lofty and noble ideals made him the darling of the people and kings and potentates and populace were united in showering tokens of their admiration and respect on this man of their country's destiny. Twice the crown was offered to him which he did twice refuse saying--- It does not behove a Minister to become a monarch. Kingship should go to the scion of a royal family, and Saintship to the descendant of the Saint." That the Buragohain was a man of beautiful physical building and rare personality can very well be imagined from a conversation between Ram Singha, the Mogul General, and his envoy Panditrai, who had the opportunity of seeing the Buragohain during his visits to the Barphukan's camp on diplomatic matters, as recorded in the Assamese chronicles. The conversation runs thus: "Ram Singha--- Well Panditrai, during your visit to the Barphukan's camp you must have formed some idea of the Ahom Ministers and Commanders. Please tell me what you have seen and what you think of them. Panditrai— The Barpatra Gohain, the Bargohain, the Barphukan and Bargohain-Phukan have all impressed me as wonderfully capable Commanders possessing a rare combination of handsomeness, accomplishment, valour and wisdom. As to the Buragohain (Atan), he is young in years, fair and attractive in features, sober and deep in
intelligence, dexterous in all matters and he rivals all others in the soundness of his counsels. Ram Singha—It is really wonderful that a man can be so intelligent when he is so young. Panditrai—The Buragohain is also an arch-diplomat. Ram Singha—Who will be able to cope with such a minister when he comes to years? Pride should be the heritage of the land where such counsellor has taken his birth." Like Atan, Purnananda also commanded respect from the subjects.

Except Debera and Laluk Solay no other officers among the Ahoms conspired to occupy the throne. As said by Atan, it was not the business of the ministers and officers to occupy a throne. Besides, Lengdon, the lord of heaven, said to his descendants that one who does not belong to a royal family should not be allowed to sit on the throne. So, during the long six hundred years of rule, the Ahoms never accepted anybody as their king who did not belong to the royal family. Whenever there was dearth of a prince fit to occupy the throne, the nobles and the officers ruled the country themselves keeping the throne vacant until an able prince becomes available.

The faith and devotion of the Ahom officers to their religion as well as to their official duties were unique. During the reign of king Lakshminath Singha, a Vaisnavite Ahom noble being persuaded to accept initiatory 'mantras' from a Sākta Gosāin, tactfully replied as follows: "I am the son of an Ahom, what 'mantras' have we got? We are all bewildered by the bait of worldliness. If we take 'mantras' and sit down for a moment to utter them, the children will cry, the women-folk of the house will break the silence of the atmosphere by their gossips, our
retainers and tenants will give out a vociferous howl, and commands will come from the king to proceed to his presence at once. So, how will one bring his 'mantras' to perfection? So we, the sons of the Ahoms, have all agreed to cherish the religion as profounded in the Bhagavata. So, why should we be offered the 'mantras'? The nobles and higher officials were men of principles with a high sense of self-prestige. They did not like to use anything which was not Assamese. It is said above how the ministers of king Rudra Singha returned the dresses of the Mogul style, when the latter sent those dresses as presents to them. There are other instances in our Chronicles.

In those days, though most of the higher officials and nobles were unlettered, yet most of them were intelligent, considerate and just. Their memory was also very sharp. The intelligence and the sense of duty of a common officer, in those days, were very praiseworthy. During the important session of the Assembly, while discussion was going on as to how to make the country free from the vassalge of the Moguls, king Chakradhvaja Singha asked Jayananda Tamdoloi, who was in charge of the magazine-house, about war provisions in the store. Tamdoloi informed the king that there were plenty of provisions. At the end of the Assembly, Jayananda approached the king alone and informed "We do not possess even a single box of gun-powder. As regards shots and bullets, we have not got in store even four boxes, nor do we possess even a stack of arrows. As your Majesty put the question to me in the presence of the Assembly at the Court, I deliberately submitted an encouraging, though misleading, report, because a contrary version will demoralise our own
people and gladden the heart of the enemy." 10 In the battle-field, every Assamese soldier and their superior officers were very stubborn in their resistance, active and dutiful to their appointments. Except horse-soldiers, the Assamese soldiers fear none to encounter with. Shihabuddin who accompanied Mirjumla, remarks: "They (Assamese) are greatly frightened by horses, and if they catch one, they hamstring it. If a single tropper charges hundred well-armed Assamese, they all throw their arms down and run away, and if they cannot flee, they put their hands up to be chained as prisoners. But if one of them encounters then Musalman infantry men, he fearlessly tries to slay them and succeeds in defeating them." 11

(c) Spirit of Nationality and Self-respect:

Further we have said that the Ahoms not only succeeded in bringing about a political unity among the various racial inhabitants of the land, but also infused in them a strong spirit of nationality and patriotism. We come across enough instances of valour and patriotism in the Chronicles. When Lachit Barphukan personally surveyed the position of the enemy from the top of his post in the Company of a few other men, tears rolled down from his cheeks and he said to himself—'It is a tragedy that my country is facing this catastrophe during my Phukanship. How will my king be saved? How will my people be saved? And how will my posterity be saved? This momentary sorrow did not however, make him loose his heart; he soon came back to himself with redoubled vigour in the task of defending his motherland." 12 All the sons of the soil considered their country as a casket of gold or a golden dish; whoever acted detrimental to the cause of the country was considered an enemy and his life was not spared.
That was why Lachit Barphukan did not hesitate to cut into two pieces his dear maternal uncle, who neglected his duty in the cause of the country at a critical moment.

The Assamese people, during the period of six hundred years of Ahom rule, could never for a moment tolerate the influence of the foreigners. Their sense of self-prestige was so high that they did never look with a greedy eye to the wealth of a foreigner. An English gentleman, Dr. W. Nassau Lees, LLB, who came to Assam in the early part of the British rule, in the year 1846, has regretted for his utter failure in winning over the hearts of the common men even by showering rupees on them.

The Paik system of the Ahom Government fostered friendship and unity amongst the common people. Every smallest unit of the Paiks, called 'gota' consisted of four Paiks, who, generally, do not belong to

When in the same capacity (private person) I visited my estate in Assam, though the proprietor of thousands of acres of land and employing as many of the people as were not too indolent to work and spending amongst them monthly a sum of money equal to the whole annual collection of a Mauza, though I made my entry with two elephants and such other outward and visible signs of wealth and barbaric splendour as were calculated to indicate that I was a person of some consequence, though I scattered handfuls of rupees amongst the drunken reapers whose fields I passed over, though the villager 'en masse' had full permission to cut wood and to graze their cattle gratis in my forest; and though some of them had been allowed to cultivate my lands without paying any rent whatever, none of the headmen of the villages came to pay his respect or to welcome me; villagers positively refused not to give but to sell me a cup of milk; and it was with considerable difficulty, I procured such means of subsistence, as rice, milk, eggs and fowls for the few days, I remained in my estate.

Vide, Durbin, By-B.Sarma, 1951
the same family. It was the system of those days that when one or two Paiks of the 'got' work under the state, the remaining three or two, had to look after the household affairs of their absent comrade. Thus the units, from the smallest to the highest, inculcated a spirit of harmony and friendship among the inhabitants of the country. The Paiks, after returning from their service in the capital enlightened their village comrades with informations about the internal and external affairs of the State. Dr. Bhuyan writes:

"On return from service the Assamese villager came with his budget full of news which was listened to rapturously by his home keeping relatives and companions. The news of Gargaon*, the Ahom capital, as it reached the masses through the lips of those periodic servitors had its own characteristic odour being in the semblance of 'travellers tell'. Through these agents court politics came frequently to be discussed in the villages. This interest in politics sometimes assumed a vital shape, as these very same villagers might have been asked to supply a contingent for an expedition to Cachar and Jaintia or against the Moguls. The villagers had to know something about the political institutions of the country, as every one of them, if not otherwise employed, was a worker for the State; and instances are recorded of ordinary servitors rising to eminence by their superior knowledge and efficiency. These informations brought by the servitors from the court and the capital to the village people, living at a distance from the metropolis made them mentally sufficiently advanced for receiving the vast mass of political literature that was in circulation in the country." 15

Besides, "the courtiers and nobles lived in an atmosphere of literature. Their Ligiras or lackeys, like the slaves of ancient Athens, occasionally played the part of pedagogues, painters, physicians and poets." 16

(e) Administrative Efficiency, Evil of Punishments and other Corruptions:

Though there was no written constitution for the administration, the Ahom rule in general was good for the people, at least up to the latter part of the 18th century, i.e., prior to the Moamaria insurrections. The Ahom
kings tried their best for the progress and development of the country. They gave protection to the country from the enemies and people lived within the country happily in peace and prosperity. Administration was strict and fair. With reference to the administration of the country, 'Lengdon', the Lord of heaven is said to have advised the first progenitor of the Ahom Kings who came down to earth and said, "If a person commits a crime, do not kill him at once without fair trial. Cleanse him if he offers a feast by killing a cow. You must confiscate all his properties... If you find a person, having unlawful intercourse with the sister of his mother or of his father, or one depriving his father of property by force, you must drive him away from the country. If you do not punish such a person, others will be demoralised by his example." Instances of punishing such a sinner by confiscating his property or by driving him away from the country are very often met with in the chronicles. Amongst the Ahom and the Koch kings, there were many powerful kings, who were conversant with the rules of polity as incorporated in the Hindu Political treatises. The Ahom kings appointed Brahman-scholars, conversant with the political treatises, to help them in discharging administrative function. From the chronicles it is learnt that they ruled the country guided by the four cardinal principles of politics, viz., 'Sama', 'Dama', 'Bheda' and 'Danda'. In the 'Darrang Rajvansavali', it is said about the king that "he (king) was conversant with 'Sama', 'Dama', 'Bheda' and 'Danda' and knew the application of all the weapons. He was expert in music and knew well how to keep his mind and body pure; further he knew the manners and customs that are to be observed by a king. He was beautiful to look at, grave and steady and devoted to God, Brahmanas and saints."
Ahoms had maintained an honest policy can be inferred from the advice given by the ministers at the installation ceremony of a king. In one of the chronicles, the Buragohainjis found to have advised the king Pramatta Singha at his installation ceremony, regarding the responsibilities and duties of a king. The Buragohain said, "By the grace of God, you have now achieved the position of the king. It is your Majesty's bounden duty to protect the honest and punish the wicked and to see to the happiness and misery of the people. When a man takes shelter under a big tree, he does not feel the heat; in the same manner, you were so long under the protection of your brother king on the throne, you were beyond the reach of the virtues and vices of the subjects; but your Majesty became shelter of all those things now. (Therefore) Your Majesty should make a rule by declaration that such and such actions are right and such and such actions are wrong and accordingly one should follow it or desist from it.'

According to Maniram Dewan, the Buragohain at the time of the installation ceremony, says, "Your Majesty ought to be equipped with informations about the motives of the people of the country through the mouth of a spy previously worked in war. A back-biter being unable to tolerate the prosperity of an honest man, informs many things against him to the king; but the king should not consider them to be true (immediately). If the facts, reported by such a person are found similar in consultations with other honest men, then they should be considered as true and if others except the back-biters do not sneeze the same, then the back-biters should be punished by the king." 

As we have discussed elsewhere, the Ahom kings did many benevolent actions, for the well-being of the people and in case of default of revenue
for many years, the Ahom Kings pardoned their arrears. 21 Chastity of the women was strongly guarded in the society; the adultery was condemned and the sinner was convicted and punished. But the sinners, at all times, were not awarded corporal punishments. In one of the important chronicles, it is said, "Any body mixing with a sinner may be cleansed of his sin if he offers a feast by killing cows and buffalos. But those persons who kidnap women and usurp others' property, should be put to death; those who commit rape on their mothers, their brothers' wives and daughters-in-law should be put to death. The females should not be allowed to be united with other male persons." 22 The sin and offences mentioned above are not seen in the higher rank of the society.

One of the much spoken of evil of the Ahom rule is the cruel punishments inflicted upon the offenders. The European writers, like W. Robinson, E. Bait etc. speak vehemently against the severe punishments given to the offenders. Robinson says, "A great injury committed could be expiated only by a great injury repaid. Severity and retaliation were consequently the two main principles that characterized the whole of their penal code. The cruel mutilations practised by them, were shocking to the highest degree." 23 It is true that the Ahom Government inflicted cruel punishments on the offenders, particularly on the rebels. The rebels were never spared, sometimes even their families too. It is for this serious nature of punishments inflicted on the offenders that serious types of offences were rare in those days— at least up to the middle of the 18th century, i.e., prior to the Moamaria insurrections. Still then, it cannot be denied that the punishments meted out by the Ahoms to the offenders by mutilating the various limbs, is very heart-shocking. Wicked justices Punishment was awarded according to
the principle of injury against injury. If a particular part of the body is injured, that part of the body of the offender is to be flayed.

Sometimes the father was made to eat the flesh of his son and vice versa. Despite this severity of punishment, conspiracy and treasons were not very few in the country. Towards the last part of the Ahom rule, when the ruling power became weak and the ministers and high officials began to indulge in dirty power-politics, the treason and conspiracy became very common in the country. As it was the convention of the Ahoms that no prince with a defect on any part of his body can occupy the throne as king, many young princes of different royal families had to lose their limbs in the hands of the emissaries appointed by the power-loving ministers or weak kings. This they did to make the throne safe for themselves or to remove the hindrances from their way to occupy the throne. This is indeed a sad chapter of the Ahom rule and a small territory called Namrup, in the east of modern Sibsagar Subdivision, was filled with the groaning sighs of the princes, who were deported to this place after being mutilated or disfigured. Dr. Bhuyan, in his book, called 'Konwar-Bidroh', depicts a picture how the different disfigured and dejected princes living in a state of exile in the territory of Namrup, were involved in a series of conspiracies against the throne of Assam. In the last part of Ahom rule, the internal collusions increased so much, even in the capital, that during the reign of king Rageswar Singha, his Barbarua (the chief executive officer), once, while proceeding to attend the court, was attacked by some conspirators. Thenceforth, he introduced the system of keeping body-guard known as 'Tāngan-dhārā' along with the Barbarua as a measure of security for his life.
So long the Ahom kings remained powerful and strong there was no corruption or mal-practice in the Ahom rule. The higher officials could not accept anything as presents for anything done by them without the approval or knowledge of the king and one who did contrary to this was punished by the king. But towards the last part of the Ahom rule, particularly after the Mootamia insurrections, the administration became slack and corruption crept in. The higher officers began to take bribes from the subjects and the subjects were tortured for it. Such allegations of taking bribes and exploiting the property of the subjects, very often came to the Prime Minister, Purananda Baragohain against Badan Barohukan, the Viceroy at Gauhati. In the matter of dispensing justice also corruption crept in; the offenders tried to purchase the favour of the judges by entreaty and giving bribes. That the offenders attempted to persuade the judges to give their judgments in favour of the offenders, is proved by the prevalence of the phrase 'Khäñani-lotani' (entreating and persuading by giving bribes).

From our sources it is learnt that those who were in the services of the king, their economic condition was far above the common people. In the records there are instances of officers entrusted with more than one office and accordingly their earnings were larger. In the 'Katha-Guru-Charit' it is found that one Hirya Doloi was in charge of five offices such as Doloi, Majindar, Chaudhari, Pätowarimenä and Thakuriä, through which he earned a lot of money. The other officers also earned a lot as revenue from the people of their establishments and also by deciding cases. In the same way we find another Hara Singha Ujir Bora, an officer amassing wealth and properties. Another Haricharan, who was the Sabha-pandit (court-scholar), had
nine store-houses and 260 servants to serve in his house. It would not be wrong to infer that towards the last part of the Ahom rule, some of the officers did not hesitate to amass wealth and property by taking bribes and adopting unfair means. During the reign of the Ahom king Gaurinath Singha, one of his officers, the Choladhara Phukan, who was the son of the Bargohain, one of the three great councillors of the State, had collected a vast amount of wealth. The Choladhara Phukan, had married the daughter of the king but she died a premature death. The Choladhara Phukan decided to spend three lakhs of rupees at the Śrāddha ceremony of his wife. His father, the Bargohain having heard the decision of his son, in order to make him cautious in spending such huge amount of money, asked through an agent what amount of money he would spend in the Śrāddha ceremony of his father when he (the Choladhara Phukan) decided to spend so much of money at the Śrāddha ceremony of his wife. The Choladhara Phukan sent reply to his father saying that he would not spend a farthing neither from his own income nor from what he possessed from his father; if he simply spends one fourth from the property and wealth of his wife that may amount to three lakhs of rupees. The Choladhara Phukan asked his father through the agent to rest assured by saying that an ordinary man even knows how to perform his father's Śrāddha ceremony. Now he being the Choladhara Phukan and his father the Bargohain, the Bargohain should not come forward to ponder over the matter. This incident vividly shows, what amount of wealth and properties, the Choladhara Phukan was the lord of. Moreover it is learnt from the records that Badan Barphukan gave things as dowry loaded in many boats to his daughter Pijau who was given in marriage to Oresa Nath Dhekial Phukan, son of the Prime Minister, Purnananda Buragohain. It was the custom
in those days that whenever a common man had to go to meet a higher officer or a noble, he was required to go with some presents, which was, in Assamese, called 'Mu-chowa' (Mu = face, chowa = seeing), i.e., for seeing the face.32

(f) General Rules and Regulations of the Court :—

Besides the usual sitting of the court, only the king could summon the great Assembly of the nobles, officers and other minor officers, whenever he desired for the same. Strict procedure was followed as to the invitation of the nobles and the officers to the Assembly and the making of arrangement of seat for them in the great darbar Hall, according to their rank and status. The daily proceedings of the court, had never been stopped even for a day, and the Barbarua had to be present in the court always. In the absence of the king even, the Assembly Hall could not remain vacant. But whenever the king was away from the capital, the Barbarua who was in charge of conducting the proceedings of the court, had also to accompany the king. In such a case the Nyāya-sodha Phukan remained in charge of the Barbarua's functions. So long the king did not send for the Dangariās for discussion, they could not meet the king; neither the three Dangariās could call on each other nor any officer like Phukan and Barua could call on the Dangariās, without the permission of the king obtained before hand. At the time of the Assembly in session, no noble or officer could talk with each other individually. The king indicated the end or dismissal of the Assembly by offering betel-nuts to the three Dangariās in the conventional way and as soon as they were offered betel-nuts, they had to leave the Assembly Hall. There were certain conventional procedures regarding appointment and dismissal of nobles and officers by the Ahom king.
and the procedures varied according to the rank and status of the nobles or the officers. Conventional procedure was also followed in formally receiving a foreign ambassador in the court of the Ahom kings.

(g) General Rules and Regulations observed in the Social Life:

From the foregoing discussions it is clear that the position of a man in the society was decided by his rank and status granted by the king. The Brahmana, Mahanta, and the Satradhikar were also given different rank and status by the administration. Social conduct was mainly religious and the spiritual leaders were held in equal esteem with those of the administrative officers. As can be inferred from the above, distinction, as a rule, had to be maintained between the aristocrats and the common people. This principle of maintaining distinction between the aristocrats and the common people was strictly enforced by the order of the Ahom kings. In one of the chronicles, it is found that during the reign of the king Shurampha, alias Bhaga Raja (A.D. 1641-1644), a trader called Lakhtakia Mudai constructed a house fixed with phulchati (short upper tie beam in a roof); when this news came to the ear of the king, the king by order had dismantled the house and prohibited others to construct house in this style. Further, he proclaimed that beads made of gold, earings known as Thuria and made of gold and ring made of gold should not be worn by them. He even asked the Ahoms not to cross their own ranks in dress and ornaments; whoever would exceed this rule would be slain, he said. Scarfs having embroidery with gold threads, Narā-mekhelā (a kind of lower garment worn by the women of the Nara country) and Narā-cholā (a shirt worn by the male persons of the Nara country) were also prohibited. As regards distinction to be maintained under the Ahom rule, Edward Gait writes:—
"The Social distinctions between the aristocracy and common people and, in later times, between the higher and lower castes, were rigidly enforced. None but the highest nobles, had a right to wear shoes, or to carry an umbrella, or to travel in a Palanquin, but the last mentioned privilege might be purchased for a sum of one thousand rupees. Persons of humble birth who wished to wear chaddar or shawl, were obliged to fold it over the left shoulder and not over the right, as the upper class did. The common people were not permitted to build houses of masonry or with a rounded end, and no one, but the king himself was allowed to have both ends of his house rounded. Musalmans, Marias, Doms and Haris were forbidden to wear hair long and members of the two latter communities were further distinguished by having a fish and a broom, respectively, tattooed on their foreheads."

Distinction in wearing garments was maintained. Only the nobles and higher officers could put on silken garments. The lower garment or Dhoti, known in Assamese as 'Churiā', worn by a common man could not go below the knee; so also in case of ornaments. There was restriction in keeping long hair and the officials only could keep curling hair. The Marias had to shave their heads totally. Even in wearing of garlands and taking of mark on the forehead called 'Reghā', 'Phoṭ' etc., distinction had to be maintained, in those days, according to the status and rank enjoyed by the persons.³⁴

2. Impact of Vaisnava Movement :

The Vaisnavite movement, on the other hand, contributed the lion's share in the cultural progress of the Assamese society. This movement, in respect of religion, literature, education, the art of dancing, singing and dramatic performances, brought about a renaissance in Assam. As said above, it further bound the people together with the feelings of fraternity and humanity and religion and cult. The unity fostered by the second factor, sometimes, was so strong among some sects that it led them to defy the even administrative authority. Another important contribution made by the
Vaisnavite movement towards the growth of nationalism and the spirit of harmony among the people of diverse racial strains is that unlike other parts of India, it made the caste system more liberal. Many of the Non-Aryans were initiated to Hinduism. Except inter-caste marriage and taking of cooked rice there was no strict rule enforced to debar the low-class people or the non-Aryans from mixing with the high class people. But before they were initiated to Hinduism they were required to be refined and pure, both internally and externally; therefore, the Vaisnavite Movement had to render many reformatory services to these people. Before these people were initiated, they were made refined and cultured by imparting them socio-ethical rules of conduct. Even to-day we find the common people living in the villages, who, though not lettered, are far more cultured than their counterparts in other parts of India. Describing the cultural progress made by the Vaisnavite movement, Dr. Bhuyan writes: "Through the network of Satras and Namghars spread all over the country, knowledge permeated the masses of Assam. Illiteracy was no handicap to the acquisition of knowledge as there were arrangements everywhere for reading aloud portions of the scriptures and explaining their purport to audiences of household members and large congregations of villagers." Further he writes, "There grew in Assam what we may conveniently term 'illiterate literacy' of a form unknown in any part of India. An Assamese villager of the older type still carries this tradition about him; and if we can make him speak freely we shall see that he possesses a fair acquaintance with the general contents of the epics and the Puranas."** The point will be further discussed in connection with education.

Equality and spirituality were the important things which were to be maintained in devotional matters by the Vaisnavites of Assam. These two factors, along with the liberalisation of caste system, made Sankardeva's cult extremely popular. According to Sankardeva, one should not be necessarily a Brähmana to recite the name of God Krisna. Dr. S.N. Sarma, discussing
with appropriate quotations from Sankardeva about his attitude towards caste, writes—"Sankardeva and his immediate followers took an attitude towards the caste system similar to that of Ramananda,'let no body enquire of one's caste, whosoever in love remembers God is his own' was their motto also in the religious field. In the spiritual domain Sankardeva not only shook off caste distinction but cast off race prejudice also.....

The following verses from 'Dasam-skandha' by Sankardeva clearly bring out his attitude towards caste in the sphere of religion:

Jānīlo Brāhmaṇa janma
huibeka nālāge ā́ra
 yito Krisna kathāta rasika //
Yaita taita hauka janma
Sisi jana sarvottama
 Yāra śraddhā hari bhakatika //
Jāti kulāchāra dharma
Kona kārya sādhibeka
 jnāna kona kāryata śakata //
Aṣṭāni ajāti pāpi
Krishaka bhojoka mātra
 Tāra haiba paraśa mahata //

(Translation - He who is interested in the deeds of Kṛṣṇa need not be born as a Brahmin. He is considered to be the best of persons; no matter where his birth place might be, who has deep regard for Hari. What purpose would the race, and the caste, its customs and manners serve? What knowledge is capable of? the ignorant, the out caste, the sinner, whoever he might be, will acquire great merit if only he worships Kṛṣṇa.)\[36

As a result of this liberal policy in respect of religion, the Vaisnavite movement succeeded in initiating into Hinduism a large number of non-Aryan inhabitants in the Medieval period, making them devoted, righteous and refined in their manners and customs. One of the most important
teachings of Vaisnavism is that one should not only respect and be non-violent to the fellow beings but should show kindness and pity to all living beings; because as souls God is living in the hearts of all. It teaches them to surrender at the feet of the Almighty God to detach themselves from worldly objects and to suppress the ego. As a result of these teachings of Vaisnavism, we find, even to-day, the common people, as very modest, simple, well-behaved, devoted, refined and righteous besides having some knowledge of religious lofes, the art of dancing, singing and playing of instruments. From whatever rank or position of the society he comes of, he possesses all these qualities, either owing to his direct contact with Vaisnavite teachings or with traditions handed down to him. Violence to living beings is prohibited in Vaisnavism and it enjoins an 'uttama-bhakta', i.e., a devotee of the first category to see all living beings in God and God in all living beings.* 38 Sankardeva taught these lessons not only from the scriptures but by his exemplary deeds also. For example, on his way to the pilgrimage, one day, Sankardeva saw a deer being entrapped in a snare of a hunter; he then, feeling pity for the animal, asked his disciples to set the deer free from the snare and to keep a piece of eight anna coin in the snare for the hunter.* 39 There are many other such examples in the biographies. Examples of humanity, respect to each other amongst the devotees and the culture of good behaviour and good conduct are found in the biographies. Respect or good behaviour to fellow

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* Samasta prānikā dekhe iṣvara Krisnata /
Harika dekhya yito prānī sarastāta //
Sampurna aśvāryya vyāpī mohī jagatāta //
Hena dekhe yito sei mahaṁ-bhāgavata //

----- Bhakti Ratnakar, By-Ramcharan Thakur, Edit. By- M. Mahanta, verse-556.
devotees can be best illustrated from an example narrated in the 'Katha-Guru-Charit'. Amongst the disciples of Madhavdeva, there was a devoted disciple named Madhu, belonging to the Abor tribe. One Baikuntha, while passing through, touched the sitting mat of Madhu with his feet. Neglecting him, because of his Abor origin, Baikuntha did not show him the respect called by the courtesy of the Vaisnavas. This immoral attitude brought a serious repercussion; Baikuntha lost his peace of mind and his health began to fall day by day. At length being advised by his preceptor, Baikuntha apologised Madhu for his behaviour with due procedure and regained his former state of life.

In the narration of another incident, it is found that once three disciples, who were 'Salai' by caste went to the preceptor Hari. Hari-guru, after feeding the three disciples, asked his wife to remove the plantain leaves, on which the disciples were served with food. But his wife refused to do that as they belonged to the low community. Then Hari-Guru rebuking her as unfit to do such a holy work removed the leaves himself.

Vaisnavism laid stress on honest earning and honest living; both ends and means, according to it, must be justified. Those who do not abide by the rules of morality or religion in earning for the maintenance of his family, they must suffer from deficiency. In the 'Katha-Guru-Charit', it is narrated: One Madhava, son of Khira Maral, whom Madhavdeva addressed as 'Mitā' i.e., friend, one day complained to Madhavdeva, that in spite of his hard labour, he could not make two ends meet. Madhavdeva pointed out that he had been performing many immoral works for his livelihood daily. As for instance, he ploughs with his pair of bullocks daily from morning till after-noon, milks the cow twice daily and prepares food at night before the rising of the sun. At the advice of Madhabdeva, when
Khira Naral's son Madhaba began to leave the ploughing of land before noon, milk the cow once daily and prepare food after the rising of the sun, then the cultivation of half of his land began to yield sufficient production for the maintenance of his family. Another Damodar is also found described as suffering from insufficiency for his immoral actions done for his livelihood.

Vaisnavism lays stress upon external purity. After sleeping, eating, sexual intercourse etc., one becomes impure and should take bath. A Vaisnava should not be addicted to intoxicated drugs and should keep honest company.

Vaisnavism advised the women not to mix with other male persons freely; they should cover their body from head to foot with cloth, so that no body can see any part of their body.

About the hospitality, respect to old persons and kindness to younger and any family members, shown by the Assamese people, W. Robinson says:

"Their habit of life are predominantly domestic. Respect for old age is carried to a great height and when parents are no longer capable of labour, they are supported by their children and are seldom allowed to become a burden on the public. They have also in general a very tender regard for their offspring and are affectionate and kind to their relations. They are also hospitable to people of their own caste but to no others."

Here, Robinson is not correct in saying that Assamese people are hospitable to the people of their own caste but to no others. We have already discussed that in Assam the caste system was made more liberal by the Vaisnavite Movement and the humanity is one of the main teachings of it.

REFERENCES

1. A Descriptive Account of Assam, By- W. Robinson, 1841, p-254.
2. Ibid .... pp- 255-256.
4. Ibid .... page- 177.