CHAPTER IV

The Social and Cultural Synthesis

The period from the 15th to the 17th century does unquestionably mark a significant era in the social and cultural life of the Assamese people. During this time the different racial elements were welded together and forged into a healthy Assamese Society rich with the invaluable contributions of the Ahoms, the Koches and the Vaisnavite movement. Prior to this, a strong national spirit or other cohesive elements which are most necessary to form a strong society or a nation, had been found wanting amongst the Mongolian tribes, who constituted the greater bulk of the population of the land. There was no strong central power amongst the Mongolian Chiefs to bring all of them under one parasole and to form a united front. In this respect, the cultural activities play a dominant part; but during the early period of the rule of the Kamarupa kings, Hinduism could not make much headway in the non-Aryan societies. Edward Gait aptly remarks that the majority of the population, in the early period, remained outside the pale of Hinduism; it could not penetrate deep into the non-Aryan societies.

It so happened, perhaps because of the fact that some of the rulers of this period belonged to the non-Aryan families, and the different dynasties ruled the country for short periods. Therefore, political and cultural unity amongst the people of Assam was not so strong in the ancient period. It is indeed a great achievement of the Medieval period that the disintegrated people belonging to different families of races with different language and culture could stand united to form a strong nation and a culture, preserving the dignity of a brave independent people by baffling the frequent terrible attacks made by the great Moguls, and the credit for this, decidedly, goes to the Ahoms, the Koches and the Vaisnavite movement.
The Ahoms came to this land not with an intention to go back, but to settle like the sons of the soil. They first established themselves in power by bringing the whole of the Brahmaputra valley from Sadia to the river Manaha under their domination and inaugurated a new rule in this land as their own mother country. They considered this land to be a casket of gold, a golden dish, and whoever went against the interest of this country or did anything detrimental to it, was considered a traitor, whose posterities even, were not spared. Thus the Ahoms were the first to have infused a strong national spirit amongst all sections of people, living within the domains of their kingdom. They sacrificed their language for Assamese and a larger number of them, including the kings and nobles, accepted Hindu faith. All the Ahom kings and nobles, patronised Hindu culture, specially literature and religion, during their life times. They accepted for their wives the daughters of the aboriginal tribes of Assam. Thus they completely identified themselves with the people of the soil within the first three or four centuries of their rule in Assam. They enriched the Assamese literature by contributing their historical literature to it. During the six hundred years of their rule, a large number of tanks, temples, Devalayas and roads and ramparts were constructed. For the maintenance of the temples, the Devalayas and other religious institutions like the 'Satras', sufficient grants and donations, in the form of men, money and properties, were made by the Ahoms kings. The Brahman scholars and priests who served for the cause of the Hindu faith and culture, received sufficient subsidies. There were, in the court of the Ahom kings, a large number of scholars, artists and litterateurs, who were highly encouraged and patronised by the kings. They offered all possible helps for the spread of Hinduism.
Hinduism in the country and many controversial points which appeared as problems at different times were solved in the Ahom court, after due deliberations made by the appropriate authorities. The Ahoms were very liberal in their social and religious outlook. They did not attempt to impose upon the victims, their language, their religion and their social manners and customs; on the contrary, they accepted those things from the victims.

The Ahoms proved to be a unifying factor and patrons of Hindu culture and faith amongst the non-Aryan tribes by accepting Assamese as the lingua-franca of the State. King Rudra Singha, son of Gadadhar Singha, made the country culturally more developed and enriched by establishing a cultural link with greater India. He was the most powerful Hindu monarch in the North-Eastern India, at the time. He adopted practical measures to drive out the Mohammedans beyond the river Karotoa, and succeeded to a great extent in forming a Hindu confederacy against the Moguls with the consent of all the Hindu kings at that time. But as his life was cut short he could not translate his ideas into practice. Dr. S.K. Chatterjee says highly of this king and loves to call him the 'Sivajee' of our eastern India.

The Ahoms, besides maintaining peace, unity and freedom, made the Assamese people economically very secure, industrious and a first rate power in the Medieval India. In fine, the Ahoms, during their rule, completely attuned themselves with the people of the soil and succeeded in bringing all-round development of the country in the remote 15th, 16th and 17th centuries with the co-operation of all, which was damaged to a great extent in the later centuries by the Mohanari insurrections and the Burmese invasions.
Next to the Ahoms, comes the Koches. It does not mean that other political powers like, the Kanata, the Kachāris, the Chutias, the Bhuyans etc. had no contribution in building up the Assamese nation; but they come next to these two powers. King Naranarayana of Kochbehar rendered invaluable services in spreading of education and culture amongst the general public. It was during his reign, and at the initiative taken by him, that besides the epics and purānas, different treatises on grammar, astronomy, arithmetic were written in Assamese. Further, it was at his initiative that a large number of non-Aryans were included into the Hindu fold. He engaged one Pitambor Siddhanta Vagisa to re-write the Hindu code, with necessary modifications where necessary, to make it more liberal. This was indeed a pioneer work done by king Naranarayana and it made the way clear for others to advance in the Hinduisation work.

The contributions made by the great Vaisnavite movement in the national life of the Assamese people in the Medieval period, should always be given top priority. The Ahom and the Koch rule are no more to-day, but what the scholars in the courts of the Ahoms and Koches did, are still enduring amongst us. In fact, their cultural activities, which bound together the different communities and races into one society or one nation, are more effective than any other factors. After the Ahoms and the Koches, the Vaisnavite movement inaugurated by Sri Sankar Deva, rendered remarkable services for the social and cultural upliftment of the Assamese people. It is for the credit of the cultural progress made in this period, at the initiative of the Ahoms, the Koches and specially the great Vaisnavite movement, the Assamese people can boast of even now as the possessor of a rich culture, which withstood the great national misfortunes, like the
Moamaria insurrections and the Burmese maraudings. The Vaisnavite movement diffused Hinduism in every nook and corner of the Brahmaputra valley and converted a large number of non-Aryans, which were outside the pale of Hinduism in the early period. These neophytes, after a gradual process of purification and elevation, were included in the Assamese Hindu society as integral part of it. This religious movement brought about tremendous social reforms amongst the Assamese people, enlightened them with the taste and knowledge of literature, dance and music and taught them polite behaviour and manners and customs through the innumerable village Namghars.

Another most important factor that helped the progress and development of the Assamese society, is concord and unity seen amongst the Aryan and the non-Aryan populations. In the establishment of this unity and harmony, the language, the cultural and racial synthesis caused by admixture of cultural and racial elements and the liberalisation in caste system, contributed the lion's share. The Assamese language came into prominence from the reign of the Kamata kings. Madhab Kandali, who rendered the great epic Rāmāyāna into Assamese verse, under the patronage of Barah Manikya, a Kachari king (opinion differs), in the 14th century, made it clear before all that Assamese language could be used as the medium of literature. For three reasons, viz., its being the State language under the Ahoms, secondly the translation of various epics, purānas and other treatises into Assamese under the patronage of Koch king Naranarayana and lastly the acceptance of it on principle by the Vaisnavites as the vehicle of their literature, it became the vehicle of the vast tract from Sadia to Karotoya and served a great deal in the cause of integration.
We cannot exactly say when and how racial admixture began in Assam and as regards this we can not supply definite data from the early period. But historians believe that it began in the very early days of migration. About the extent of racial admixture in the Medieval period the picture is quite clear to us and we are discussing on this point thoroughly elsewhere in the book. The same thing can be said about cultural admixture also. The extent of the cultural admixture will be noticed in the different chapters below. Cultural admixture between the Aryans and different Tibeto-Burman groups is seen in different spheres, like, language, literature, music, religion, manners and customs, industries etc. Even, the contributions made by the Mohammedans, who came late, to the arena of Assamese culture, is not at all negligible. During the Ahom rule many Mohammedan artists were imported by the Ahom kings to this country from different parts of India. So, this is the period in which we get a picture of a synthetic Assamese society well established on a sound political, economic and cultural background.

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