Chapter 7

Legacy of These kingdoms

The vassal kingdoms under the Ahoms were ethno- centric. Some of these kingdoms had been in existence before the coming of the Ahoms to the Brahmaputra valley. The history of their origin makes it clear that these kingdoms emerged in the wake of the fall and decline of the Palas of Kamarupa in the 11th century A.D.¹

Baruah writes, "Jayapala's defeat at the hands of Ramapala of Bengal was probably due to the lack of support of some powerful feudatories or tribal chiefs. After Jayapala's death, most of the feudatories set up their independent kingdoms and so did most of the tribes under respective chiefs. Several Mongoloid or Indo- Mongoloid tribes in the eastern part carved out their independent principalities under the respective chiefs."² These kingdoms were tribal kingdoms being ruled by the tribal chiefs/kings. Some of the principalities were ruled by the Bhuyan chiefs, called the Bar- Bhuyans.

Thus each tribe had a territory or principality of its own for all intents and purposes- economic, social, cultural and political. They had the exclusive rights and privileges for the maintenance and preservation of every bits of their tribal traits and character and ethos, language, customs, traditions, food habits and taboos, religious beliefs and conviction, and economic freedom, mainly the rights of the community over the lands and forest products.
The rise and growth of the Ahom kingdom and state power marked a new beginning in the history of these kingdoms. The Bhuyans were suppressed and their principalities were amalgamated with the Ahom kingdom while the tribal chiefs offered their allegiance to the Ahoms on their own for protection and preservation of their special and separate existence. Both the Ahoms and the disparate tribes were in a semi-tribal semi-feudal stage of development, both in the sphere of economic production and political system. The Bar-Bhuyans were in a higher stage of feudalism in comparison both to the Ahoms and the tribes. The economic system of production and distribution of the Bar-Bhuyans was much akin to the type of feudalism prevailing in northern India. Therefore, while the Ahoms resorted to destroying the power of the Bhuyans, they did not do so with respect to the disparate tribes living beyond Kaliabor in the south and north bank of the Brahmaputra. They did not attack the habitat of these tribes either. They remained satisfied with the offer of political allegiance by these tribes.

The Ahoms, as a matter of fact, left these tribal kingdoms to enjoy their political freedom and independence so long as they remained loyal to the Ahom sovereign. These kingdoms survived and continued to survive something like autonomous territorial units within the Ahom kingdom itself. But despite this fact, these kingdoms were not allowed to grow to the stage of 'states within a state'. They were, in all intents and purposes, under the suzerainty of the Ahom sovereign, but they were allowed to enjoy internal autonomy to the fullest extent.

There was no interference in the day to day administration of these kingdoms from the side of the Ahom sovereign. This kind of polity was helpful for the protection and preservation of the ethnic identity of the disparate tribes inhabiting these kingdoms. This gave birth to a healthy tone of relations between
the Ahoms and the various tribes. It was definitely based on the principle of live and let live. It also helped in the creation of an atmosphere of mutual trust, confidence and co-operation between the vassal kingdoms on the one hand and the Ahom kingdom on the other.

Thus under the Ahoms the polity and administration of Assam underwent a gradual transformation towards federalism. This sort of polity was conducive for the rise and growth of a greater Assamese nationality comprising the entire territorial confines in the Brahmaputra valley. The Assamese language thanks to the vaishnavite preachers readily provided the required lingua franca for communication among the disparate ethnic groups and people of the region. Even the family histories (Goid Puthis) of the tribal chiefs/kings were being written in the Assamese language. In the field of religion also the neo-vaishnavite movement started a process of de-tribalisation and Hinduisation congenial for nationality development.

In times of external emergency, as has been demonstrated earlier, the forces of these kingdoms offered resistance in the spirit of a confederacy under the leadership of the Ahom sovereign. This also created a sense of belonging and attachment to a definite territorial-geographical region thus helping in the emergence of a sense of nationality in the minds of the various ruling houses and their subjects.

These are important legacies of the vassal kingdoms and that of the Ahoms. The kind of polity evolved by the Ahoms with respect to the vassal kingdoms proved to be conducive for the maintenance of the ethnic, linguistic and cultural mosaic of all the peoples of the region. There was no attempt at suppression of one ethnic group by the other, of one linguistic group by another. There was no attempt at the imposition of one language over the other group.
The Ahoms did not impose their language and culture either on any ethnic group or people in Assam either. They themselves had followed the principle of assimilation and they assimilated with the tribes and peoples they found in Assam. They accepted the Assamese language and culture in preference to their own, thus demonstrating the principle of assimilation.

The descendants of the Muslims who were taken prisoners in the course of the Muhammedan invading forces settled in Assam and assimilated themselves with the local people. They appeared to be more Assamese than the Assamese themselves. Sihabuddin Talish writes, "As for the Musalmans who had been taken prisoner in former times and had chosen to marry here, their descendants act exactly in the manner of the Assamese, and have nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims." 7

The people after their conversion to Islam continued the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses. Haliram Dhekial Phukan writes, "The Muslims in Assam behaved like the Hindus. They worshipped the goddesses like Bisahari (Manasa), Barmani, Subhachandi, etc." 8

Thus the people and tribes had full freedom in their religious belief and conviction too. The different aspects of the Assamese social life show that the prevailing polity was conducive for the healthy growth of brotherhood among the different sections of the disparate peoples and tribes. The sense of toleration and mutual respect to each other in religious and cultural traits and characters was at the root of these developments. The society was almost free from communal sentiment and thinking. The peoples and the disparate tribes lived in complete harmony professing their own belief in god and religion.
In the defence of the country the people professing different religions also demonstrated the same sense of loyalty and patriotism. The Ahom general Lachit Barphukan had the unflinching help and support of Ismail Siddique alias Bagha Hazarika in the Battle of Saraighat in 1671 A.D.  

The process of Hinduisation that followed in the wake of the neo-vaishnavite movement was not a forceful one it was based on willing cooperation of the people who desired conversion to Hinduism. The process of Hinduisation had first begun with the tribal chiefs/kings, and then the economically and socially stronger section of the tribal society followed them. As a matter of fact, the process of Hinduisation or conversion to Hinduism was regarded as a question of prestige and social status. The process had its beginning with the patronage to the institutions of brahmanical learning and land grants to the Brahmins by the various tribal chiefs/kings. Thus there was conversion without coercion. The tribal chiefs/kings became Hindu by their own choice and so also the case with the tribal people. This gave birth to a sense of security trust, confidence and cooperation. The history of medieval Assam was, therefore, free from forceful religious conversion. This was due to the healthy tone of political toleration to the emerging poly-cultural ethos and environment in the vassal kingdoms.

These are important legacies of the vassal kingdoms during the period of our study. Therefore, it may be observed that the Assamese society has been a plural society since the medieval period.

Notes and References

2 Ibid.


7 Quoted in Gait, op. cit., p. 149

8 Bhattacharjee, Jatindramohan, ed., *Assam Buranj* (1829) of Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Mukshada Pushtakalaya, Guwahati, 1962, p. 103
