Chapter 8

Conclusion

The history of the vassal kingdoms has been treated in the preceding chapters. Before we conclude it is necessary to resume a brief summary of the findings of each chapter. The introductory chapter deals with the origin of the vassal kingdoms. As has been demonstrated some of these kingdoms had been in existence since before the coming of the Ahoms in the early 13th century to the Brahmaputra valley and some emerged during their rule. The number of vassal kingdoms was more than 72. These kingdoms originally had comprised the territory now covered by the districts of Nowgong, Marigaon, Kamrup in the south bank and Darrang and Sonitpur in the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The chiefs/kings of these kingdoms belonged to the Tibeto-Burman race while the subjects were of mixed population. Some of the tribal chiefs/kings belonged to the matriarchal families, particularly the chiefs of Khola, Sahari, Gobha, Neli, Damal, etc. They maintained some of the traits of the matriarchal family system for a long time.

The Second Chapter deals with the relations between the vassal kingdoms and the Ahom kingdom. The petty tribal kingdoms accepted the suzerainty of the Ahom kings by offering their political allegiance to the latter in all intents and purposes. The vassal kingdoms were political dependancies of the Ahoms.

Despite this fact, they enjoyed maximum autonomy. The autonomy enjoyed by the vassal kingdoms was in reality the application and extension of
the principle of joint-rulership followed in the Ahom kingdom itself. Under the Ahoms, the three great Gohains “had provinces assigned to them, in which they exercised most of the independent rights of sovereignty,...” Kalita opines, “The Gohains had separate territorial jurisdiction assigned to them by the monarch and they enjoyed complete administrative autonomy within their respective territories.” Like the three Gohains, the Barbaruah and the Barphukan too had separate territorial jurisdiction. The territory belonging to the Barbaruah comprised the area from Sadiya to Kaliabar which fell outside the jurisdictions of that of the Burhagohain and the Bargohain. The territory belonging to the Barphukan originally comprised the area between the Kallang and the Brahmaputra in Nowgong.

Apart from this the Ahom system of administration was not based on centralisation, it was based on decentralisation. It was free from the burden of over-centralisation. The absence of a centralised administration under the Ahoms made it possible for the survival of the vassal kingdoms with maximum autonomy. Again, the Ahom system of administration developed through an evolutionary process. Therefore, there was new addition with the occupation of new territory. While dealing with the autonomy of the vassal kingdoms it is important to remember these salient features, practices and developments.

The Ahom sovereign did not interfere in the day to day administration of the vassal kingdoms. They acted as members of a confederacy in times of external emergency and offered resistance against the invading forces under the leadership of their liege-lord.

The Third Chapter deals with the political and administrative organisations of the vassal kingdoms. The nature of polity prevailing in the vassal kingdoms was similar to the one prevailing in the Ahom, Kamrup-Kamata, Koch-Behar,
Chutiya and the contemporary Kachari and Jaintiya kingdoms. The hereditary principle of succession to the throne was followed in the vassal kingdoms.

The political and administrative organisations in the kingdoms of Panbari, Dimorua, Gobha, Neli, Khola, Sahari and Damal were much akin to that prevailing in the Jaintiya kingdom. They bore the imprint of the Jaintiya system of rule. The succession to the throne slightly differed from that prevailing in other contemporary kingdoms. In these kingdoms the nephew of the king or the king's brother-in-law succeeded to the throne.

The incompetent king was liable to be dismissed by the subjects and they could enthrone another in his place. The Ahom king also had the right to appoint anyone as the king of a vassal kingdom. The king had a number of officials to serve under him for the well-being of the subjects. It was the duty of the vassal king to pay annual tributes to the Ahom king.

The Ahom king, however, did not interfere in the day to day administration of the vassal kingdoms. The latter enjoyed maximum autonomy. They must give support to the Ahom king in times of external emergency or aggression by foreign power.

The Fourth Chapter discusses the relations between the vassal kingdoms themselves. There were altogether five groups of tribal kingdoms- the Tiwa (Lalung), the Karbi (Mikir), the Kachari, the Garo and the Koch kingdoms. Thus the kingdoms were ethno-centric and tribal dominated. Besides matrimonial relations they maintained political and military relations among themselves. As the kingdoms emerged on the basis of tribes/clan, they lived in an atmosphere of friendship. Hardly had there been any feud or clash between two or more kingdoms. They mostly lived in peace and amity.
The socio-economic condition of the vassal kingdoms has been discussed in the Chapter Fifth. There were several social classes, viz., the tribal chiefs, officers and priests constituted the upper class, the peasantry stood next to them, then there was the class of petty traders and artizans, and lastly, the slaves and bondsmen.

The economy was based on barter, though money, along with cowries, was in circulation in certain parts of the Ahom kingdom and in some of the vassal kingdoms as medium of exchange. Both internal and external, trade and commerce flourished. The commodity production was in a limited scale to provide only the needs and requirements of the upper strata of the society. The economy was in a subsistence level, the surplus production being minimal.

Land as a source of production belonged to the community or clan or tribe. There was no private property in land. The people enjoyed a hereditary right of occupancy on the land used as homestead, bari and basti. Originally the cultivation was based on 'jhuming', later with the beginning of settled habitation permanent cultivation in the plains was resorted to by the people. Irrigation was done with the help of 'dong', a kind of dug out canal. They cultivated ahu and sali (wet) rice, mainly for home consumption. Apart from rice they produced various horticultural products, including spices.

The handicraft industry supplimated their agricultural productions. Every household has a handloom of its own for the production of various kinds of cloths, cotton, pat, muga and endi. There was no separate class of weavers in Assam, though the tanti emerged in Sualkuchi and Barpeta later on for production of cloths in larger quantity.
The village artizans like braziers, potter, carpenter, goldsmith, tanner and blacksmiths produced domestic furniture, musical instruments and various articles necessary for agricultural pursuits and fishing activities.

The socio-cultural life of the chieftains and their people has been discussed in Chapter Sixth. There was no marked difference between the socio-cultural life of the chieftains and their subjects. The vassal kings had to pay tributes to the Ahom king at fixed rate in terms of money as well as other articles. The vassal kings were in a subordinate status and position in relation to the Ahom king.

The people of the vassal kingdoms mainly consisted of various sub-tribes of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. They speak/spoke their own dialects/languages. Apart from the distinctive tribal dialects and languages, the people also spoke Assamese.

The tribes inhabiting the vassal kingdoms had been under the control of their village organisations. The village organisations administered the people through traditional and customary laws. The 'dormitory' for the young boys played a vital role in the character formation and education of the tribal society. It was something like a training centre of the tribal youths for leadership.

The marriage of the girl in the tribal society took place only after she attained puberty. There was no child marriage as in the upper caste Hindu society. Widow marriage was also prevalent among the tribes of the vassal kingdoms. In marriage, rice-beer (zhu) has been profusely used.

The tribes were mostly animistic, though later on they started worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses. Some of the tribes offered human sacrifice before the goddess Kali. Before being Hinduised the centres of fertility cult at Sadiya,
Silghat and Nilachal hill in Guwahati had belonged to the Kacharis and the Austrics respectively.

The neo-vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankaradeva (1449-1569) led a mobilisation of various sections of the tribal people to Hinduism. Following several stages of initiation, many of the tribal people had become Hindus and moved to the Hindu fold. The *satra* and *nam-ghar* played a very crucial role in this respect too.

The vassal kings also were great patrons of (Hindu) learning and Brahmin pandits. A host of literary figures emerged and contributed towards the enrichment of Assamese language and literature under the patronage of the tribal chiefs of the vassal kingdoms.

- The tribes celebrated numerous festivals, including the *bihu, barat, dvishu, kherai, bathaubrai*, etc.

The cultural synthesis and literary efflorescence that had begun under the patronage of the tribal chiefs of the vassal kingdoms helped in the emergence and formation of a greater Assamese society and nationality.

The Seventh Chapter deals with the legacy of the vassal kingdoms. There were two kinds of vassal kingdoms, one had been in existence since before the coming of the Ahoms to the Brahmaputra valley, and the other emerged after the coming of the Ahoms.

These kingdoms were on the south and north bank of the Brahmaputra and in the present day districts of Nowgong, Marigaon, Kamrup, Sonitpur and Darrang.

The vassal kingdoms existed as autonomous units of the Ahom kingdom. They were identical with various tribal habitats maintaining their tribal/ethnic
individuality and character. The existence and survival of these kingdoms were possible because of the prevailing nature of the Ahom polity.

The Ahom polity, as a matter of fact, had been based on joint-rulership, the king being the head of the state. The Burhagohain, Bargohain, Barpatra Gohain and the Barbaruah and the Barphukan each had separate territorial jurisdiction of their own. The power and authority enjoyed by the vassal kings/chiefs was similar to the power and authority enjoyed by the highest officials in the Ahom kingdom/state.

The vassal kingdoms on the one hand and the Ahom kingdom on the other were of the nature of a confederation, each contributing to its strength and weakness. The confederacy character of these kingdoms was based on mutual trust and confidence and toleration and it ultimately helped in the creation of a greater Assamese society and nationality. So long as the confederacy character of these kingdoms were maintained it proved to be a source of strength against foreign aggression and invasion on the one hand and against internal danger on the other.

This sort of confederacy was also helpful in the maintenance of social harmony and cohesion among different sections of the people and tribes. The confederacy character of the polity again helped in the process of assimilation of different sections of the people and tribes.

The greatest legacy of the vassal kingdoms, therefore, stood in the sphere of social harmony and linguistic-cultural and racial assimilation. The process of Hinduisation, mainly under the neo-vaishnavite movement, had begun with the willing co-operation of the disparate tribes and ethnic groups of people living in the various vassal kingdoms as well as within the Ahom kingdom. The history of medieval Assam was free from forceful religious
conversion. The healthy tone of political behaviour ultimately spread over to the sphere of social and religious and cultural plane.

The lead was actually given by the Ahoms. With the support of the vassal kings/chiefs the Ahoms laid down the foundations of a plural society in Assam. This they did out of political exigency. No conscious historian or social thinker can afford to lose sight of these lessons.

Notes and References


3 Ibid., p.100

4 Ibid., p.101