The Ahom Government conducted its relations with foreign states as well as tributary rulers, chiefs and tribes through its accredited envoys. They were called phu-chou (in the Ahom language), or kataki or vakil. Envoys were very often deputed to the foreign courts with letters and presents; and in the same way foreign envoys were received by the Ahom Government from time to time. The employment of envoys to convey messages, written or verbal, from one government to another, in time of peace or in war, was an ancient custom prevalent among many ancient peoples in the east as well as the west. The Tais, who enjoyed a long political continuity in East and South-East Asia, were no exception to it. According to the Ahom tradition, as recorded in their chronicles, Leng-don, the Lord of Heaven, sent Leng-sheng as royal messenger with a letter to Then-kham,

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1 The Assamese term kataki is derived from word katak meaning "army". In ancient times certain persons, who accompanied the army during the expeditions, were often sent to the enemy camp to deliver messages. Such persons were known as kataki meaning "one who conveyed messages".

2 JB, pp.19 ff.
another powerful ruler, seeking latter's advice to send down Khun-lung and Khun-lāi, the two progenitors of the Ahom royal families to the earth, which had suffering from chaos and disorder due to the absence of an efficient and strong ruler.  

It has been recorded in the chronicles that Siu-kā-phā, the first Ahom king, soon after the founding of his new kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley, despatched his envoys with letters and presents to Siu-khrān-phā, his cousin brother and the ruler of Mōng-Māo.  

This was done, perhaps, as a mark of recognition of the authority of the Mōng-Māo ruler, who had commanded Siu-kā-phā thus: "Go you brother. Forget not to send annual tributes to me" at the time of latter's taking leave of the former. Siu-khrān-phā is said to have expressed his satisfaction at this, and in return, sent his envoy with letters and presents to Siu-kā-phā. 

Although the form and contents of actual letters are not available, the articles of presents exchanged between the two rulers are listed in the buranji. Those sent by Siu-kā-phā included silver water jug, water jar, tāo cloth (a variety of cloth), basowāl (a variety of cloth). The presents sent by Siu-khrān-phā included one horse with saddle, cross

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3 A-B, pp.6-8.  
4 DAB, pp.8-9; AB(KTP), pp.11-13; SAB, p.46.  
5 Ibid.  
6 Ibid.
bow, embroidered coat, shoe and gold embroidered cap. Thus started the cordial and brotherly relations between Siu-kā-phā and Siu-khrān-phā, and it marked the beginning of the link of the Ahom king not only with those of Mōng-Māo but also with several other Shan States. Soon after his accession to the Ahom throne, Siu-kā-phā's son Siu-tu-phā sent his envoy with letters and presents to the Mōng-Māo ruler, Siu-khrān-phā, who also reciprocated by sending letters and presents to the former. In this way relations had been continued, and envoys from both sides shuttled for the next several centuries till the end of the Ahom rule. Envoy was, thus, engaged by the Ahom kings to conduct foreign relations from the beginning of their rule in Assam.

During the early period of the Ahom rule, from the beginning to the close of the fifteenth century, there were not many foreign rulers and chiefs with whom the Ahom Government had regular or occasional exchanges of envoys. In the Brahmaputra valley, its foreign relations were limited to the Chutiya, the Kamata and the Kachari rulers. In the east its relations were chiefly confined to the rulers of Mōng-Māo and Mōng-kang, both

7Ibid.
8SAB,p.7; DAB,p.102.
9It was during the reign of Kamalesvar Singha that the last embassies came from Mōng-kang. Tu.B,pp.172-176.
were commonly known as the Nara-Rajya to the Assamese people. The number of envoys engaged in the conduct of foreign relations of the Ahom Government during the period was, therefore, not many. This period being the initial one, the Ahom rulers could not leave, with confidence, important assignments like the conduct of foreign relations to people other than those of their own stock. But with the further enlargement of the Ahom kingdom during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries covering almost the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, more and more foreign states came within the ambit of the Ahom foreign relations. Besides, due to various factors, the contacts with some foreign governments became more frequent and wide ranging. The Ahom envoys, who had so long been more accustomed with the eastern courts now found themselves unfamiliar in dealing with the courts of the western powers like the Koch, Bhutan, the Mughals which greatly differed in customs, manners and even languages. Consequently not only the number of envoys had been increased, but also qualified persons from even non-Ahom families, who were well-versed in knowledge of those states and powers had been employed as envoys. It has been mentioned in some Assamese chronicles that during the reign of Siu-seng-phā (1603-1641), an Ahom envoy named Le-tāo, who was sent to the court of Koch king Naranarayan, and who was accompanied by two Koch envoys on his return journey, could not report correctly even their names when enquired by the king because their names
were very unfamiliar to him. Such deficiency and lapses on the part of the Ahom envoys had greatly annoyed the king. "In future it is not proper to send Ahom envoys to foreign states. If he could not report this to me, how could he do in foreign courts?", the king observed, who, after having consultation with his ministers decided not to send envoys of the Ahom families to the western states. Finding the Brahmans were most suitable persons in conducting foreign relations with these powers, the same king had selected and recruited as many as fifteen new envoys from fifteen Brahmin families for sending them to Koch Behar and the Mughals. The names of the Brahmin families were - Kaliya, Chaturbhuja, Dharadhar, Chandibar, Ekadah, Thakari, Ram Kandali, Barguru, Sagar Kandali, Bar Kandali, Chota Kandali, Madhav Kandali, Sitaliya, Birina and Nirah. This was, however, not the first instance of the appointment of Brahmans as kataki as mentioned in one Assamese chronicle. Earlier in 1556, during the reign of Siu-khām-phā, Chandibar Sarma and Damodar Sarma, belonging to Brahmin families, were deputed as envoys to the court of Koch king Naranarayan.

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11 Both AB(SM), p. 39 and PAB, p. 70 gave the number of envoys as 14 whereas AB(HK), p. 36, a chronicle of much later date, puts the number at 13.
12 AB(SM), p. 39 says that these were the family (ghar) names.
13 PAB, p. 70.
Envoys from non-Brahmin Hindu families, too, had been deputed as envoys to the courts of foreign rulers. During the reign of Jaydhvaj Singha (1648-1663) two envoys i.e. Dayangiy Bara and the brother of Komorakhowa, who were not Brahmins but non-Ahoms, were sent with letters and presents to the court of the Jayantiya king, Yasamattarai.\(^{15}\)

In course of time, it became a well-established convention to depute envoys of the Ahom families to the states lying to the east of Assam such as Möng-Mão, Möng-kang, Möng-mit and other Shan States of Burma whenever occasions arose. Several considerations have led to the growth of such a practice. First, the language of the people as well as of the courts was the Tai which was the same with the original language of the Ahoms. As such the Ahom envoys faced no problem in transacting in those business states. Secondly, the Ahoms, who originally came from Möng-Mão, were accustomed with the customs and manners of the courts and people of those states. The Ahom envoys, who mostly belonged to the Chiring family\(^{16}\) were familiar with such customs and practices. In the same way, the envoys recruited from non-Ahom families whether Brahmins or non-Brahmins had been deputed to states in the west.

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\(^{15}\) JB, p.21.

\(^{16}\) Tu.B, pp.142,173.
because the languages and customs of those states were familiar to them.

Towards the later part of the Ahom rule the contact with the western powers became more frequent and multi-dimensional which occasioned a further increase in the number of envoys of the non-Ahom families in order to transact such business. With the increase in their number, the envoys had been categorised into three ranks (i) bar kataki, or the envoys of the senior grade, (2) maju kataki, or the envoys of the middle grade, who mostly accompanied the bar kataki when deputed to a foreign court,\(^\text{17}\) (3) saru kataki, or the envoys of the junior grade.\(^\text{18}\) The envoys of the first category were normally sent as chief envoys to the foreign states.\(^\text{19}\)

The appointment of envoys was made by the monarch and all royal envoys to foreign countries were sent in his name and under his order. The three Gohains, the governors of the frontier provinces, the Barbarua, and the Barphukan were, however, entitled to depute missions in their official capacity to foreign courts on royal directive. For this purpose they engaged either their envoys or some other officers to act as envoys. For instance, the Barphukan deputed one Nidhi Saikia

\(^{17}\)Ibid., p.167.
\(^{18}\)AB(HK), p.129.
\(^{19}\)Ibid., p.130.
with the two Kachari envoys, Camataka and Satgaonyapatar, under the order of king Jaydhvaj Singha. During 1800-1801, the Barphukan sent his two envoys Pangkaj and Kanchiga to Bhutan.

About the qualities that the envoys should have king Siu-seng-pha said thus, "An envoy should be like a plate. Your words are your means of subsistance. As gold is refined by means of borax, the king's prestige is brightened by the words of his envoys." A person appointed as envoy must possess certain personal qualities like the power of advocacy and exposition, the power to control of his emotion, the power of persuasion, excellence in subtle argument, witty, humourous, full of common sense and intelligence to save many difficult situations. The envoys of the Ahom Government, Sanatan and Kanu sent by the Barbarua to Nawab Allah Yar Khan in 1630 in their reply to the Nawab's querry about the time taken in journey from Gauhati to the Ahom capital, Garhgaon, said that it normally took two months' time. Jaynanda, an Assam trader and the son of Duardar who was, also, present at the Nawab's court informed the latter that it took only eight days in journey. At this the Nawab charged the envoys of

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\[20\] KB, p.40.
\[21\] Tu.B, pp.145-146.
\[22\] Ms.No.7; PAB, p.201.
\[23\] PAB, p.178.
\[24\] Ibid.
giving wrong information, "Why do you tell me that it takes
two months' time in the journey?" At this Sanatan replied,
"Both the Svarga Maharaja of east and the Padshah of Delhi
of west always rely on what the envoys say. Now you give cre­
dence to what the merchants report to you. We have nothing
to say. You accept what you think proper. What we say is true."

At such observation the Nawab was satisfied and said, "What­
ever the vakils (envoys) report is true." Again, Nirah and
Sonabar, the two envoys of the Ahom Government, sent to Jayan­
tiya capital sometimes after 1648, when charged by the Jayantiya
Raja for delivering a verbal message requesting the latter
for the return of certain articles of a merchant of the Ahom
kingdom not mentioned in the letter, replied thus, "We had
placed this matter before our king, who told us that you were
my envoys. Why should anybody not accept what you say? Petty
things should find no mention in royal letter."

An envoy
must be trustworthy and faithful to his king and his country.
He must not divulge any secret or weakness of his king or kingdom
and expected to be honest and sincere in his service, and
also dignified in his behaviour.

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., pp. 178-179.
27 JB, p. 20.
Not only that they should have good knowledge of their own country, but they must also have some information of the country they were visiting. The envoys deputed to the western states were required to have a command over Sanskrit, and also a working knowledge of the language prevailing in those courts. They must have a good educational background, and sharp memory to recite, as and when necessary, episodes and illustrations from ancient scriptures. There were, however, occasions when an envoy of the Ahom Government failed to prove mastery over the Sanskrit language. Madhavacaran and Kaupatiya, the two Ahom envoys, sent to Raja Ram Singha's camps could not make conversation with Ram Singha's priest in Sanskrit language. In the same way the envoys sent to the Shan States must be well-versed in the Tai language, and a background knowledge of manners and customs of the Shan courts.

The primary duty of an envoy was to carry letters and convey verbal messages from his king to a foreign ruler. It being a universally recognized custom to send presents with letters and messages, the envoys were duty bound to take articles safe and to deliver them to persons to whom they were meant. As the articles were listed in the letters, great care was taken to ensure against any shortage, lost or damage. Among the unassigned jobs that an envoy was supposed to perform was

\[28\] PAB, pp. 143-144.
the collection of information in foreign courts and countries, the strength of their armies, the nature of fortifications, the treasury and also the nature of relations between a ruler and his subjects. It was the duty of an envoy to endeavour for the successful completion of his mission. In the court of foreign rulers he had to present a favourable impression of his king and the court, and for that purpose sometimes he exaggerated the valor and excellent qualities of his king. It was also an unassigned job on the part of the envoys to fish out information as far as practicable either directly or through assistance of others, information on any aspects of the kingdom which they were visiting. The two envoys of the Ahom Government deputed to the court of Tripura king in about 1711 instructed their assistants to attend the court at the reception in disguise so as to observe the population of the kingdom, defence preparedness etc. and to submit report to the envoys. Again, sometimes the envoys were punished for not reporting the important news of the kingdom. Chaturbhuj and Ekadah and also their sons had their eyes extracted by the order of King Jaydhvaj Singha as they failed to report him about the retreat of the Mughals and for extending help to the enemy in crossing a river.

29 PAB, pp. 174-175.
30 TB, pp. 56-57.
The envoys had always to act within certain restrictions. Any violation of such limitations was looked with great displeasure and an envoy, who did so was subjected to punishment. For example, an envoy should not offer services to a foreign ruler, even to the extent of carrying messages or letters from that rulers to his own king, minister or governor. When Ram and Laluk, the two envoys of the Ahom king and who were sent to the court of the Kachari king, Birdarpanarayan, brought, on their return journey, letters written by the latter, they were asked to explain their conduct, and after enquiry of the circumstances under which they had to bring the letter. King Cakradhvaj Singha ordered to put them in prison.\(^{32}\) Under no circumstances should fall prey to temptation of material gain offered by the foreign rulers or their officials. There had been many situations when the envoys sent of foreign missions were subjected to severed tests in foreign courts. More often they proved themselves equal to the task and did not yield to any kind of pressure, temptation or allurement. During the period of Ahom-Mughal wars, attempts had been made by the Mughal General, Raja Ram Singh to win over the Ahom envoys by offering them money, valuables or even jewels for extracting vital information about the Ahom kingdom.\(^{33}\)

\(^{32}\) KB, pp.52-53.
\(^{33}\) PAB, pp.144-147.
presents other than customary offer was highly irregular and was tantamount to acceptance of bribe. During the reign of Cakradhvaj Singha when the Mughals tried to occupy Gauhati, Ramcaran, one of the two envoys, deputed by Lachit Barphukan, who was sent to the camp of the Mughal General Ram Singh could not check his temptation when he saw a few wooden birds floating on water in an artificial pond under the seat of the latter. Seeing the curiosity of Ramcaran, the General offered him a few such birds. On his return, when he displayed these birds in the presence of Lachit Barphukan, he was put into confinement.\textsuperscript{34} It was highly derogatory on the part of the envoys of the Ahom Government to ask for anything from a foreign ruler or court. Thus having learnt that Dharadhar, Chandi, Mahindra Kandali, Arjun, Chuta Kandali, Thakuria, Daha, the seven Ahom envoys approached the Koch Raja Dharmanarayan, who was staying in the Ahom kingdom and obtained some amount and cloth from him, they were arrested and later executed by the order of Siu-seng-phā sometimes in 1627.\textsuperscript{35} Again during the reign of the same monarch an Ahom envoy named Kaliya was first imprisoned and later executed for his alleged acceptance of money, cloth etc. from Satrajit, a Mughal General.\textsuperscript{36} In the same way the

\textsuperscript{34} AB(SM), p. 95.

\textsuperscript{35} PAB, pp. 164-165.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
envoys were forbidden to engage themselves in any kind of trade either within or outside the kingdom. Bar Kandali and Sagar Kandali, who had been sent to Jagannath in Orissa were executed for bringing two females from the Mughal dominion. They should not ask for extra gratification even from the Ahom officers. It is recorded in the Ahom chronicles that Ratna Kandali, Madhab Kandali and Birina, the three envoys, who tried to poison the ear of Siu-seng-phâ against Pikcai Phukan, one of his officers for not getting certain articles they demanded, were executed for deliberately supplying false information. The envoys must not exceed the number of his retinue fixed for his mission. Kamallocate, who had been sent by king Siu-seng-phâ to deliver a girl to Birukarji of Koch Behar, was put to death for the offence that he took with him some extra persons than was fixed on the occasion.

As accredited foreign envoy always enjoyed certain privileges and immunities. He was normally immune from arrest or physical punishment unless he committed some serious offences. There are, however, a number of instances, when envoys sent by the Ahom king to a foreign court or envoys despatched by a

37Ibid.
38Ibid.
39Ibid., p. 167.
foreign ruler to the Ahom court had to experience punishment of varying degrees, which have been discussed elsewhere. The envoys enjoyed certain privileges and facilities in a foreign country. It was the recognized custom to bear all cost of their stay, food, etc. of the visiting envoys and their retinue by the host state. The Ahom envoys visited foreign countries were often entertained with food of their choice. Ram and Laluk, the Ahom envoys, who were sent to the Kachari capital at Maibong during the reign of Jaydhvaj Singha, were supplied with provision such as rice, cereal, goat, cows for milk, mutton, when fish was not available and occasionally dear meat on every eighth day. The Ahom envoy, who went to the court of the Mughal Emperor supplied with regular items of food besides varieties of cereals, ghee, pepper, asafoetida, sugar, bay-leaves, betel leaves, dear meat. Similarly, the Ahom Government provided the foreign envoys with camps wherever they were taken, supplied with food staff and other provisions and transport as long as they were required to stay within the Ahom kingdom. In supplying provision attention was given to meet their choice. Thus the Mong-kang envoys when received by the three Gohains at three different

40 Ibid., p. 45.
41 Ka.B, p. 86.
places were served with roasted buffaloes' head with horn on mehengs, or raised tray, a dish not normal to the Ahoms in Assam. Similarly the two Kachari envoys Camatakata and Satgaonya Patar when visited the Ahom court were entertained with articles normally not eaten by the Ahoms. In the matter of supplying provision to the envoys it is the custom to raise the quantity double, or four times at the time of reception by the king. Necessary transport was provided for their travel within the kingdom. Such transport included horse for travelling by land route and boat for travelling by water route. Thus the Kachari envoys coming to the Ahom capital Gargaon, situated on the bank of the river Dikhow, via Raha Chauki on the bank of the river Kapili had been provided with several big boats with boatmen and other attendants. In the same way when two envoys from Tripura visited the Ahom kingdom during the reign of Rudra Singha in 1710 they were supplied with two horses to take them from their camp to the reception hall. It was also the custom to provide with guards to protect and escort the envoy throughout their stay in the kingdom, so that they never suffered from any kind of difficulty

\[42\] Tu.B.,p.46.  
\[43\] KB.,p.43.  
\[44\] Ibid.; TB.,p.13.  
\[45\] Ibid.  
\[46\] JB.,p.73.
or physical attack. They were also given company, all along their stay, by at least one Ahom envoys. For instance, in 1704 Madhav Kandali and Ramcaran, the two Ahom envoys, remained with the visiting Jayantiya envoys throughout the latter's stay in the Ahom kingdom.

The foreign envoys were entertained after reception at the court of the king, ministers and governors with various kind of amusements games, theatrical performances even animal fights. For instance, the Bhutan envoys when received by Kamalesvar Singha at his court at Jorhat in 1801 were entertained with magical feats performed by magicians from Bengal. Similar entertainments were offered to the envoys from Mönk-kang when they visited the court of the same monarch. Among the entertainments were firing of gun from under-water, or dancing on ropes, etc. Such magical feats had been highly appreciated by all those presents in the court including the envoys. Similarly, the envoys despatched by the Ahom court to the foreign courts were also entertained. If the period of stay of the foreign envoys coincided with any public or religious festival they were allowed to participate in such festival.

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47 Tu.B., p.48.
48 Ibid., p.175.
49 Ibid.
50 KB, p.46.
The two Tripura envoys Ramesvar Nyayalankar and Udaynarayan were allowed, with King Rudra Singha's permission, to enter the temple of Goddess Durga under escort and to offer worship to her.  

It was the normal custom on the part of a ruler to offer suitable presents to foreign envoys visiting his court. In the same way, ministers also made presents to them. Thus the Jayantiya envoy, Bijayram, who visited the Ahom kingdom during the reign of Rudra Singha, was presented with gold ornaments and garments by the Barphukan. Similarly, the Ahom envoys, Jaydeo and Jay Bara, deputed by King Kamalesvar Singha received presents from Jayantiya Raja which included bangles, earrings, gold pendants, cloak, turban, waist-band, dhuti, cheleng and a few coins.

It was the custom on the part of the Ahom rulers to offer presents to their own envoys on the eve of their departure to foreign court, and also on their return for the successful accomplishment of their mission. Thus Dhiresvar, the Ahom envoy, despatched to the court of the Kachari king by the

Barbarua in 1804 was presented two pairs of dhutis, two knives with gilt handles and two knives with silver haft. After returning from the court of Jayantiya Raja in 1701 Madhav Kandali and Ramcaran were given gifts of two silk cloths and two turbans by the Barphukan.

56 JB, p. 74.