The advent of the Ahoms, a section of the Tai people who are at present widespread in South-East Asia, to the Brahmaputra valley in the early thirteenth century is an event of great historical significance. It ushered in a new phase in the history of the region which had been experiencing a period of political disintegration and decay. The old Kamarupa kingdom was divided into a number of independent or semi-independent units, each under a ruler or a chief without any central authority and coherence to bind them together against any strong foreign power. Thus the Chutiyas in the north eastern extremity, the Morans and the Barahis in the south-eastern corner, the Kacharis in the south-east, the Bhuyan in the central part on both banks vied with one another for power, while the old Kamata kingdom maintained its precarious existence in the western part of the valley. It is this situation, that facilitated the coming of the Ahoms, a foreign people who were destined to dominate the political scene of the region for the next six centuries.

Although the original homeland of the Tai, to whom the Ahoms belong, still remains a matter of scholarly debate, the theory that for a long time they lived in the coastal lowlands of southern China and the Red River Valley of Vietnam has been gaining ground, and the earlier claim that the Tais
and the Chinese both belong to the same ethnic and linguistic origin has now been severely contested and greatly discarded. Most scholars agree that the dispersal of the Tai over the mainland South-East Asia is relatively recent which occurred due to some fairly rapid series of events. They, however, differ about the method of dispersal, whether it was by infiltration or by conquest. But they agree on the point that the major over-spread of the Tai in Burma, Laos, Thailand and the Brahmaputra valley happened between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries.

The Ahoms, as a group of the Tai, had long been accustomed to an organized form of government. Their socio-political unit, known as möng, was originally comprised of a relatively small area under a chief or châo who became hereditary. In course of time, the möng was expanded into kingdom under a king or châo-phâ who was at the apex of the administration and he was assisted by a council whose members conducted their duties with the help of subordinate officers. The châo-phâ was the master of the land and the people of the möng. He alone enjoyed the authority to conduct potentates and to conduct foreign relations. Since the number of people in a möng-state was not large, all the adult male population were pressed into the service of the state as soldiers and labourers who were grouped into units of different denominations. Land-revenue was not known, and the people paid in terms of service and
produce. A study of the early Ahom Government in the Brahmaputra valley shows that it was basically this system of government that was introduced by the Ahom rulers in their newly-found state which remained unaltered in its structure throughout their long rule.

The study of the external relations of the Ahom Government shows that at the initial period, it was primarily concerned with the consolidation of the Ahom rule against the pressure of the local powers rather than with an expansion of territory. Consequently, it avoided, so far as possible, antagonism and direct clash with the neighbours at the same time, however, without giving any scope to expose its weakness. In its relations with the rulers of Mön̄g-Máo and Mön̄g-kang, the Shan States of Burma, it followed, at first, a submissive policy but gradually asserted its independence. This led to a conflict, after the fall of Mön̄g-Máo, with the ruler of Mön̄g-kang, during the reign of Siu-dang-pha resulting in the fixation of the Pat-kai hill range as boundary between the Ahom and the Mön̄g-kang (Nara) kingdoms. Thus by the end of the first period, the Ahom power fully consolidated its position and also asserted its independence from the control of the Mön̄g-kang authority.

The vigorous expansion of the Ahom kingdom by the subjugation of the Chutiyas, the Kacharis and the Bhuyans in the second period widened the foreign relations of its
Government. Powers and tribes which had earlier been outside, the Ahom political horizon, now came into contact, some even closer and some as tributaries or dependents. Relations had developed with the rulers of Gauda, and the Koch rulers of Koch Behar. The expansion of the Ahom political influence towards the west brought the Ahom power into direct conflict with the Muslim power in Bengal. Consequently the sphere of the external relations of the Ahom Government was further widened and the machinery dealing with foreign affairs was modified suitably to meet the new demands. At the same time relations with the Shan rulers were maintained.

In the third period, which was mainly absorbed by the armed conflict with the Mughals whose primary object was the subjugation of the Brahmaputra valley, the Ahom Government followed a very cautious foreign policy to meet the challenge of the Mughal power at the same time to keep the subordinate and tributary states like the Kachari and the Jayantiya and the tribes in good humour as they often tried to take advantage of the situation to reassert their independence. The sphere of external relations now embraced, besides political, commercial and other subjects. This led to certain reorganisation and appointment of envoys from the Brahmin families who possessed an intimate knowledge of the western states. The increasing number of diplomatic correspondences of the period rightly reflect the nature of the foreign relations of the
Ahom Government with foreign states. It was during this period, elaborate codes and procedures in foreign relations came into existence which remained unaltered during the subsequent period.

Although the danger of the Mughal power was over in the fourth period, which covered the eighteenth and a quarter of the nineteenth centuries, the Ahom Government came into contact with the new power in Bengal - the East India Company not only in political but also in several other matters relating to trade and commerce, foreign assistance, and extradition of refugees. It also developed direct relations with the kingdom of Tripura, Bhutan, and the Burmese who invaded the Ahom kingdom thrice. In fact this was a period of intense diplomatic activities between the Ahom Government with those foreign powers.

It was the envoys, known as phu-chao or kataki or vakil who conducted relations with foreign governments. During the early period when the relations with foreign states were limited to a few, the envoys had been appointed from certain Ahom families but with the growth of contacts with more foreign powers widely differing in language, customs and in court etiquettes, envoys from non-Ahom families but chiefly Brahmins who possessed good knowledge in those respects had been recruited. Thus towards the end of the Ahom rule, envoys of the Ahom Government belonged to both Ahom and non-Ahom families.
the former were deputed to the Shan States of Burma and the latter to other states.

The envoys must always possess certain qualities and personal characters, besides having good knowledge of the language of the court they were visiting. Under no circumstances should an envoy engage himself in trade or other business. He should not fall prey to any sort of temptation.

On the occasion of reception of a foreign envoy or envoys by the Ahom king, minister or governor, elaborate arrangements were made and the envoys had to follow certain well defined procedures, the violation of which was considered an offence. In fact, right from the arrival of a foreign envoy in the Ahom frontier till his return to that frontier, long and elaborate etiquettes had been meticulously observed. During their stay in the Ahom kingdom, the Ahom Government provided them with everything necessary, transportation, lodging, food and other things. In the same way Ahom envoys were also provided with everything in a foreign country.

Normally a foreign envoy always enjoyed certain immunities. He was immune from arrest and punishment. But in case of serious lapses and offences, sometimes the foreign envoys suffered from punishment, which, however, was not common.

The diplomatic letters carried by the envoys always written in conformity with certain forms and styles which slightly
differed from state to state. The letters normally recorded the name of the envoy or envoys and the articles of presents sent by the sender to the addressee. All diplomatic letters differing in language and contents were dated either in lāk-ni, Ṣaka, Bāṅglā Sāl or San. Some even contained months, dates and days.

The study of foreign relations of the Ahom rulers shows that during their long rule in the Brahmaputra valley from 1228 to 1826, a systematic and an elaborate system of rules and procedures came into existence which reflects a fairly high standard of diplomacy.