

INTRODUCTION

'Religion' is a term with a wide range of meanings. Hence, there is no obvious word that can be translated as religion. Yet, attempt has been led to explore it. Etymologically religion, as its root Latin word '*religare*', means 'to bind together', thus it plays the role as a binding or cohesive force in a society. In Hindu context, the word *dharma* is used which encompasses other concepts too, i.e., 'the order of the universe', 'the way things are' etc. In one sense each person has their own *dharma* corresponding to different stages of life and situation and duty. Such as, the *dharma* of a student is to study, the *dharma* of a warrior is to fight etc. And generally *dharma* means the identity that a person got from his family into which he is born. And sometimes it determines his course of action also. Whether religion or *dharma*, first of all it is a human thing that only humans do.

Religion is the most important part of a nation and it is one of the identity marks of a community. Religion is a part of our daily life. It is a fundamental aspect of culture. Culture is a way of life as well as the very framework within which a person behaves and sees the world. Religion, sometimes instead of emerging from one's culture, it becomes the culture. Because religions as well as religious traditions, beliefs and practices are the means through which one's culture can be understood. On the other hand, religion influences culture and the culture is itself becomes the medium through which religion is experienced and practiced. In this sense the *Tai Ahom* religion is also a part of the *Tai* culture.

The word *Tai* has been given to all those people speaking *Tai* language spreading over the large tract of South east Asia as well as North-east India. The vast region lying to the east of India, the south of China and north of Australia, besides China and Japan, the far east comprises many other smaller countries like Burma, Siam or Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Indo-China, Malaya, the Philippines, East Indies or Indonesia, Formosa and Singapore altogether generally constitute the South-east Asia are the regions inhabited by the *Tai* people. The *Tai* ethnic group, in its different branches, is most wide spread in the Southeast Asian peninsula. The various branches of the *Tai* are found in Vietnam, Laos, the Chinese province of Guangxi, Thailand, interior of Yunnan and in North East India too.

Assam has been a meeting ground of numerous populations of various ethnic groups with their social structure and cultural heritages from time immemorial. The *Tais* entered to this part of country at different intervals by the various routes with their racial origin and have contributed their respective share in forming the physique of the Assamese race, language, religion and culture in the process. The *Tai Ahoms* are one of them, who in the early part of thirteenth century by crossing the Patkai range entered the Brahmaputra valley and settled the glorious '*Ahom* dynasty' under the leadership of *Tai* prince *Chao lung* Siu-Ka-Pha. The *Tai Ahom* is a branch of the great *Tai* race. The *Tais* are widely spread in the Indo-Chinese peninsula and beyond. They are variously known as *Tai*, *Htai*, *Pai-i*, *Moi*, *Moung*, *Tho* or *do*, *Khamti* as well as their local names such as the *Shan*, *Thai*, *Siam*, *Lao*, *Dai*, *Nung Bouyei*, *Dong* etc. The *Tai* families of North-East India are known as the *Tai Ahom*, *Tai Phake*, *Tai Khamti*, *Tai Turung*, *Tai Aiton* and *Tai Kham yang*.

The *Tai Ahoms* were a *Mao* branch of *Tai Yue* group and their script is *Tai Nua*. They originally came from Mung Mao Lung of South China or present Dehong Dai Singpho Autonomous Prefecture of Peoples Republic of China.

The *Tai Ahoms* while came from Mung Mao Lung, they brought with them their original traditional religion of the ancestor worship. Instead of professing any major religions like Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism, they are continuing a mixed form of religion with the elements of the three religions. But their uniqueness and identity as a *Tai Ahom* religion is entirely based on the very cult of ancestor worship and *Khon* belief.

AIM OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The aim of the present study is neither to test any hypothesis nor to examine any problem. The study aims to analyze the underlying philosophy of the *Tai Ahom* religion and it also aims at bringing out the details of the various rituals of the traditional *Tai Ahom* religion. It also examines the changes that have taken place in this religion as well as the factors of change. The impact of Hinduism of various creeds on the *Tai Ahom* religion are examined in this study. Again the process of revivalism among the *Tai Ahoms* which led a strong urge to return to the root, is also

examined here. The impacts of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism over the beliefs and practices of the *Tai Ahom* religion are also tried to bring out here.

The influence of Hinduism in the Royal family and the court could be traced to an incident in the 14th century which occurred during (1382A.D.) an act of jealousy between two wives of the *Ahom* king Tao Khamthi (1380-1389) which resulted in the victimization and banishment of the younger one by the Prime Minister. As she was pregnant the penalty awarded was to set her adrift on a raft in the Brahmaputra. The queen was subsequently discovered by a Brahmin, but died giving birth to a son who until his fifteenth year was brought up by the Brahmin and was named Sudangpha. In 1397 A.D. he was discovered and put on the throne in succession to his father who had earlier been assassinated. Following his coronation, the old Brahmin and his son who had sheltered him and brought him up, were given positions of importance, thus paving the way for Brahmin influence and gradual penetration of Hindu rituals and ceremonies (Dev and Lahiri 1984:93). Again King Pratap Simha's reign (1603-1641) the influence of Hinduism has gradually grown up over the *Tai Ahom* King and the subject. He is believed to have possessed of an evil spirit and to get rid of this before his accession to the throne, he gifted lands to temples and Brahmanas. He also built temples and made sacrifices to goddess Kamakhya. Similarly during the reign of king Gadadhar Simha (1681) (he patronized Saktism), Joyadhaj Simha (1648-1663), Rudra Simha (1696-1714), Siva Simha the remarkable progress of Hinduism took place and that had overshadowed the beliefs and practices of traditional *Tai Ahom* religion. Yet the three priestly clans did not give up and continued performing their traditional religion and as a result they become the present custodians of the *Tai Ahom* religion. Hence the basic beliefs and practices were tried to analyze here relying on the traditional religion performed by the three priestly clans.

Adaptation and assimilation are the common factors of change in any trend of religion. Yet there is a continuity prevailing among the *Tai Ahoms* that prepares an identity of the origin with the branches. For instance, all the *Tais* spreading all over the world, except few of the *Tai Ahoms*, now have become Buddhists yet they are continuing their traditional ancestor worship and belief in *khon* (units of vitality responsible for the longevity). These traditional ancestor worship and belief in *khon* are the common elements among all the *Tais*. But the non sacrificial marriage

ceremony and *Phura Lung* ceremony i.e., the worship of God almighty as well as *Phura* (Buddha according to some scholars and other *Tai* groups of Assam) have the influence of Buddhism. Again, the duality of the individual self *han (phu)* and *pu* is quite similar to *yin* and *yang* of Taoism. Again some scholars have maintained that the *Pi nong* bond (elder brother- younger brother or senior- junior relation) of the *Tai Ahoms* is an influence of Confucianism.

EARLIER WORKS

Much work has been done in the sphere of *Ahom* history and culture. But in the sphere of religion, philosophical study has yet to be done. Yet the works of the scholars like Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi (*The Tai Ahom religion and Customs*, 1976), Dr. Lila Gogoi (*Tai Sanskritir ruprekha*, 1994), Dr. Birendra Kumar Gohain (*Tai Ahom Janagosthi aru Tai Parampara*, 2009) are noteworthy which have thrown light on the religion and culture of the *Tai Ahom* community.

CHAPTERIZATION

This work is arranged and divided into five chapters with a general introduction on the *Tai Ahom* religion and Conclusion. The first chapter deals with the origin of the *Tai Ahoms*. The beliefs and practices of the *Tai Ahom* religion along with the dominant significant ideas are discussed in the Second Chapter of this work, entitled – “The basic features and beliefs of the *Tai Ahom* religion”. The different religious rites and ceremonies with their philosophical significances are brought in the third and fourth chapters of this work under the headings – “The Major Practices and The Minor Practices”. Though the study reveals that the priestly clans still can write and speak the original *Tai* language and preserving the traditional *Tai* rituals and heritage yet changes are occurring to the *Tai Ahom* religion. Thus in the fifth chapter an overview has been given on this subject under the title “Change and Continuity”.

A Bibliography have been incorporated at the end.

METHODOLOGY

As this researcher belongs to the *Ahom* community she is exposed to the *Ahom* culture from her early childhood and has been participating in the various rituals of the *Tai Ahom* religion. However, in order to have a detailed and systematic study of the said religion; the researcher felt the necessity of field studies. The detailed field work for the present study was started from the year 2004 to 2010. Each field trip continued for a week or so. Moreover, some prominent *Tai Ahom* pundits of the priestly clans who generally conduct the *Tai Ahom* rituals and who are known to this researcher were requested to inform her about the dates and venues of the performance of the rituals by the *Tai Ahoms* of Sivasagar district and were contacted by her. On receipt of the information of the dates and the venues of the celebrations, this scholar attended the rituals from the day of the preparation for the rituals and had the opportunity to observe the rituals from the very beginning. For instance, this scholar attended the rituals like – *Um Pha*, *Saipha*, *Pu Phi Siu* worship, *Langkuri* worship, *Jashing Pha* worship, *Phura Lung*, *Dam Phi*, *Me-Dam Me-Phi*, *Rikkhon*, birth ritual, death ritual, marriage ritual, *Hubochani* worship, *Sara Utua*, *Gatial* worship etc.

During the course of the field trip, information was collected and collated. This scholar also got the opportunity to get acquainted with the knowledgeable persons as well as the members of the priestly classes who practiced the religion. The prominent amongst them are Dr.J.N. Phukan, Dr.B.K. Gohain, Dr. Romesh Buragohain, Yehom Buragohain, Sai Aung Tun, Mo'lung Tileswar Mohan, Harbeswar Hatiborua, Puspa Mohan, Junaram Changbun Phukan, Biswa Changbun Phukan, Bani Deodhai Borua, Akhil Pani Phukan, Atul Phukan, Medini Madhab Mohan etc. The field trip also gave her the opportunity to observe the day to day life of the *Tai Ahoms* at close quarters as well as had the opportunity to observe the religious rites.

The methods for collecting data specifically for this study were:

- i) Published and unpublished manuscripts, Books and journals were consulted
- ii) Observation, both participant and non-participant,

- iii) Interviews, both individual and group
- iv) Case studies were also made in certain cases to provide depth wherever needed.

The manuscripts on the *Tai Ahom* religion are in *Tai Ahom* script (*Tai Nua*) and *Tai* language. This researcher found some pundits who know the language and the script. They were kind enough to give the meaning of the texts as well as to explain the significance of the various steps of ritual. As such the researcher did not face any difficulty in understanding and in getting the information. The *Buranjis* written in both *Tai Ahom* language and Assamese which are preserved in the library of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian studies, Assam, Guwahati and in the personal library of *Tai Ahom* scholars and nobles were also consulted. Relevant secondary sources were also consulted. Moreover, the articles published in the local magazines, souvenirs etc. have been consulted.

The following manuscripts are deal with the religion of the *Tai Ahoms*, these are preserved by the priestly families as well as in the Tai Museum, Sivasagar, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, DHAS, Govt. of Assam, Guwahati, Institute of Tai Studies and Research, ITSAR, Moran:

- (i) *Bor phai* (written by Dam Chao Garia Mo'hung on sanchi bark, in *Tai* language, pg 11, (46.4×12.7c.m.)
- (ii) *Pun ko mung* (written on Sanchi bark, in *Tai* language pg 20,(31×10.5 c.m.)1700, owner: Tileswar Mohan, Bakata, Parijat)
- (iii) *Kai Tham* (written on sanchi bark, pg 13, (28.5×8.7c.m.) writer unknown, (cop.) Dam Chao Bajramoni Mohan)
- (iv) *Kai Theng Mung* (written on sanchi bark in *Tai* language, pg 64, (41.8×11.2c.m.) (cop.) Dam Chao Bajramoni Mohan)
- (v) *Pat nam lai* (written on sanchi bark, pg 20, (24×8.5c.m.) (written by Dam Chao Buduram Mohan in *Tai* language and preserved by Tileswar Mohan, Bakata Parijat)
- (vi) *Aptang puthi* (written on sanchi bark, pg13, (22.5×9c.m.) (written by Dam Chao Buduram Mohan in *Tai* language and preserved by Tileswar Mohan, Bakata Parijat)
- (vii) *Lit Lai Peyn Kaka* (written on sanchi bark, in *Tai* language ,writer unknown, pg 9, (24×9c.m.), preserved by Tankeswar Mohan, Bakata, Parijat)
- (viii) *Lai Tu* (written on sanchi bark in *Tai* language, writer unknown, pg9,(42.3×13.5c.m.), 26 Saka. owner: Nakul Barua, Jajalihabi, Bistrampur, Sivasagar)
- (ix) *Lao Phala* (written on sanchi bark, in *Tai* language, writer unknown, pg

41, (L:33c.m.) owner: Bidya Phukan, Patsaku, Akhoia) (x) *Nang Hun Pha* (written on sanchi bark, in *Tai* language, pg 22, (32×9c.m.), owner: Moniram Barua, Banamali, Mahmora, 39Saka) (xi) *Phuralung* (writer unknown, preserved by Dimbeswar Barua, Sagarbera, Patsaku) (xii) *Nemimang Phura Puthi* (cop) Kekhoram Deodhai and collected from Tileswar Mohan) (xiii) *Deo Buranji* (writer unknown, preserved by Tileswar Mohan, Bakata Parijat) (xiv) *Raj Buranji* (writer unknown, preserved by Tileswar Mohan, Bakata, Parijat) (xv) *Doi Phura* (written by Chikir Mo'hung, owner: Tileswar Mohan, Bakata Parijat, Patsaku) (xvi) *Ban seng* (written by Poduram Mo'hung, owner: Tileswar Mohan, Bakata Parijat, Patsaku) (xvii) *Kathi Ban seng* (written by Poduram Mo'hung, owner: Tileswar Mohan, Bakata Parijat, Patsaku) (xviii) *Kheklai Dam Phiram* (Girin Mo'hung Barua, preserved by Tileswar Mohan, Bakata Parijat) (xix) *Guput Buranji* (written by Mo'hung guru, preserved by Tileswar Mohan, Bakata Parijat) (xx) *Jasing pha Puja bidhi* (Preserved by Tileswar Mohan, Bakata Parijat), (xxi) *Kheklai* (Manuscript No. 6, preserved by Mo'lung Tileswar Mohan, Bakata Parijat) (xxii) *Charaideo Borbidhi* (DHASGovt. of Assam) (xxiii) *Phuralung puthi* Folio No.41 (Preserved in the Tai Museum, Sivasagar) (xxiv) *Nemimang Phura Puthi* [(cop) Kekhoram Deodhai and collected from Tileswar Mohan] (xxv) *Nemimang Phura Puthi* (preserved in DHAS. Folio No. 1153(A) (xxvi) *Nemimang Phralong* (DHAS. Folio No. MS 1148) (xxvii) *The Book of Prophecy*, (ITSAR MS 1) ITSAR.

As this is a phenomenal study of the *Tai Ahom* religion or as it deals with the phenomenon of the *Tai Ahom* religion, the method I have followed is empirical that includes field work as well as it is analytical also. Philosophical significance of each and every beliefs and practices are also given.

The present research work entitled “The *Tai Ahom* Religion - A philosophical Study” was undertaken to examine the philosophical basis of *Tai Ahom* Religion giving more emphasis to the existing religious beliefs and practices among the *Tai Ahom* people. At the same time an attempt was made to assess the relation between *Tai Ahom* religion with the religions - Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. This is an empirical as well as an analytical study of the *Tai Ahom* religion. The three priestly clans - *Changbun*, *Mo'plong* and *Mo'hung* are observing the *Tai Ahom* rituals in their traditional way. They are the present preservers of the *Tai Ahom* religion with

possession of *Tai*-manuscripts and hence in one sense the '*Tai Ahom*' terminology can be ascribed only to the three priestly clans. The *Ahoms* in general have accepted Hinduism, which has brought a change in their traditional socio-religious life (Barua 1978: 162). Yet in recent years a process of reversal is evolved among the priestly clans and it may be their social pride to show a separate identity by reviving and practicing the old culture and tradition. Although Hinduism and Buddhism are influencing the *Tai Ahom* religion at different ages yet the very *Tai* spiritualism, beliefs and practices are found to be deep seated among the *Tai Ahoms*. And perhaps this is the reason for the survival of this religion till today from time immemorial and far away from its original land still surviving in a distinctive manner with its cult of ancestor worship. The *Tai Ahom* religion is totally based on the cult of ancestor worship. Along with the worship of the gods, the dead forefathers are also worshipped as they are divine guardians of the *Tai Ahoms*. In the *Tai Ahom* religion gods are shown to be the master or presiding deity of different natural powers and phenomena. At the same time the *Tai Ahoms* believe in many kinds of *Phi* or guardian deity of house, village and country, rivers, trees and mountains, earth, rice etc. They also believe in evil deities, namely *Rakhin* and *Ba Khin* who cause mental and physical pain, misery, diseases etc. Above all the gods and *Phis* the *Tai Ahoms* believe in God almighty namely *Pha Tu Ching Phrong Hum*. Who is the ultimate reality and source of everything. Thus the *Tai Ahom* religion is, polytheistic and monotheistic at the same time and there is no idol worship in this religion. Sacrifice is found to be must in the *Tai Ahom* religious ceremonies. Yet two kinds of rituals are found here. One is sacrificial and the other is non-sacrificial ritual. The ceremony called "*Phura Lung*" is purely a non-sacrificial ritual and is performed by only lighting hundred and one earthen lamps. This ceremony is performed to offer oblations to the impersonal supreme God almighty. On the other hand the ceremonies—*Dam Phi*, *Me-Dam Me-Phi*, *Um Pha*, *Saipha*, *Langkuri*, *Pu Phi Siu worship* etc. blood sacrifice is a must, where cow, buffalo, pig, goat, dog fowl, hen, duck, dove etc. are sacrificed.

In the *Tai Ahom* religion rituals are performed in two ways, one is individually performed at home and the other is public ceremony as performed by the whole village or community. '*Dam Phi*' is a kind of ancestor worship performed at home by the householder and '*Me-Dam Me-Phi*' as an ancestor worship is performed publicly.

And in both kinds of ancestor worship the gods, departed ancestors are given oblation. Again '*Um Pha*' is a grand socio-religious ceremony where the gods and goddesses of local tribes as well as Hindu pantheon are worshipped very festively and this shows the liberal religious policy of the *Tai Ahoms*. The belief of performing this kind of grand ceremony like *Um Pha*, *Hubasoni* etc. brings the deeper philosophy of the *Tai Ahom* monarchs as that the descendants ultimately came into existence from their divine ancestors only, and the parents cannot be separated from their descendants. Hence when a tribe or community is conquered through wars then their worshipped gods and goddesses are also thought to be conquered. Thus the local gods and goddesses are also worshipped paying homage in the *Tai Ahom* religious ceremony. Particularly in '*Um Pha*' the gods and goddesses of hill and local Tribes and Hindu pantheon are worshipped. In the course of this work various rituals of *Tai Ahom* religion have been described with their historical antiquity. In general some of these rituals and religious beliefs have proven to be variants of *Tai*-ritual as found among the *Tais* of South-East Asia.

Instead of professing any major religions like Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism, they are continuing a mixed form of religion with the elements of the three religions coupled with animism and ancestor worship. But their uniqueness and identity as a *Tai Ahom* religion is entirely based on the very cult of ancestor worship and *Khon* belief and these two are the common elements present in all the *Tais* spreading over the world.