CHAPTER III: THE AHOMS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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THE AHOMS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE- A

The following chapter presents a very brief account of the religious practices of the various communities in mediaeval Assam in general and those of the Ahoms in particular.

A) The Hindu-cults, Sects, Sub-sects and the Emergence of Mahapurusia-dharma and the Ahoms:

Traces of popular Hindu cults could be seen within the religious practices of a number of groups in mediaeval Assam. The Chutiya tribe, a branch of the Bodo-group, who ruled in the easternmost tract of Assam (present district of Tinsukia) had their prominence at Sadiya since early thirteenth century till their subjugation by the Ahoms in the early part of the sixteenth century. They propitiated various forms of the Goddess Kali with the aid of their priests called the Deories. Kecaikhati (the eater of raw flesh) was the most important form of Kali that needed to be appeased with human sacrifice (Gait 1984:42).

The Ahoms, a Shan group, had their kingdom to the west of the Chutiyas, worshipped their gods Comdeo, Phra, Tera and Lengdon etc., since their appearance in Assam in the fourteenth century (Gait 1984:74f.).

The Kacharis, a Tibeto-burman speaking group, had their kingdom to the south-west of the river
Brahmaputra river and followed at that period of time, their own religion until towards the closing decades of the sixteenth century when their kings formally accepted the Hindu-cult (Gait 1964:250).

A number of independent petty chiefs known as Bhuyas who ruled to the west of both the Kachari kingdom and the Chutiyas, were mostly Saktas. They included both the Brahmin Bhuyas and non-Brahmins including Kayasthas and Kalitas. The Koches, who ruled most of the western part of Assam, followed their own traditional religion till they were finally converted to Hindus (Sarma 1966:3).

Thus Assam in the fifteenth century presented a picture of distinct religious and linguistic groups, the majority of whom were non-Aryan. And those who professed Hinduism loosely adhered to Vaisnavism or Saivism and Saktism or Tantricism.

Saivism:

The worship of Siva in various forms was prevalent in ancient Assam. He was the tutelary God of ancient kings of Kamarupa from the seventh to the twelfth centuries (Sarma 1966:3). The various forms that were worshiped during
that period were viz., Bhogi-Siva, who was worshiped according to Tantric rites and Yogi-Siva, worshiped according to Puranic rites.

According to K.L Barua, the later kings of the Brahmapala dynasty were votaries of Tantricism. Ardhanarishvara - worship according to Tantric rite, was probably introduced by them. The king Dharmapala himself in his inscription salutes Ardhayavatisvara (K.L Barua 1936, cited in Sarma 1966:4). The Saivic Kacharis worshiped Bathau-Brai, a form of Siva by sacrifice of buffaloes, he-goats, pigeons, ducks and cocks and by offering of rice and liquor. Naranarayana (1540-1584), the Koch king was stated to have legalized this form of worship of Siva by the issue of an edict which set apart the north bank of Brahmaputra for the practice of aboriginal forms of worship (B.Kakati 1948, cited in Sarma 1966:4).

Saktism:

Sakti, in her various forms, was a dominant cult of Assam in ancient and mediaeval times up to the advent of Neo-Vaisnavism, and even today, it holds a place next to Vaisnavism. The main centres of Saktism were the shrines of Kamakhya and Dikkaravasini. According to Kakati (1948:35-70) Dikkaravasini could be equated with the Goddess
Tamresvari or Kecaikhati to whom human sacrifice was offered. Human sacrifice was also performed in the Jayantesvari temple of Jayantiyapura.

The Snake-Goddess Manasa, a manifestation of Sakti in Assamese kavyas, the Padma-purana, and the Beula-upakhyana composed by Mankar and Durgabara during the last decades of the fifteenth century, was very popular in western parts of Assam.

Vaisnavism:

The worship of Visnu in the form of Vasudeva in ancient Assam was quite evident from the Baraganga inscriptions of Mahabhuti Varman (554 A.D) which referred to the king as Parama-Bhagavata. The Kalika-Purana (c.12th) mentioned five manifestations of Vasudeva with their pithas, of which Hayagriva-Madhava at Manikuta and Vasudeva in the Dikkaravasini region were most important (Kakati 1948:71-72). King Laksminarayana who ruled at Sadhayapuri recorded in his inscriptions (1401 A.D) that he granted two hundred putis of land in the village Bakhana to a Brahmin Ravideva, son of Harideva, who was a regular worshiper of Vasudeva (The Journal of the Assam Research Society vol.III, No.2:42).

However, there was a considerable predominance of Saivic and Sakti cults over Vaisnavism. This was because, "...majority of the Hindus instead of delving
deep into the mysteries of Tantricism of Sakti and Saiva cults, resorted to them and adopted the outward philosophy of sex and palate as the real criterion of their religion" (Sarma 1966:6). As Kakati put it:

The land was infested with itinerant teacher with the Vamacara Tantric schools with their insistence on the philosophy of sex and palate. Among religious rites, the most spectacular were bloody sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening noises of drums, cymbals, night vigils, virgin worship and the levir dances of temple women (Kakati 1948, cited in Sarma 1966:6).

Emergence of Mahapurusia-dharma : The Neo-Vaisnavism

Towards the closing decades of the fifteenth century, the religious history of Assam took a new turn. It was Sankaradeva who initiated the Neo-vaishnavite movement and firmly established the vaisnava faith as the supreme religious order in the Brahmaputra valley. His ideal was to propagate a simple system of religion based on devotion and faith. He was not interested on a philosophy of religion, for he knew that the society was more in need of a reformation than a system of philosophy. And thus Bhakti became the most important aspect of his religion. The essence of Bhakti was mainly derived from Bhagavata-purana and the Gita. This was quite evident from their works like 1. Bhakti-ratnakara and Bhakti-pradipa by Sankaradeva, 2. Bhakti-ratnavali, an Assamese translation by Madhavadeva, 3. Namaghosa by Madahavadeva, 4. Bhakti-viveka by Bhattadeva and 5. Ghosa-ratna by Gopala Misra; all written in the sixteenth and the early part of the seventeenth centuries. The new cult thus
moulded according to the local circumstances, was popularly known as the Mahapurusia-dharma or Ekasaranadharma or the religion of supreme surrender to one God, i.e., Visnu or Krisna.

After the death of Sankaradeva (1449-1568), when Madhavadeva succeeded him, there was a general discontentment among some senior disciples of Sankaradeva. A section of the Vaisnavas headed by Damodaradeva seceded disowning Madhavadeva's leadership.

When Madhavadeva died, he did not select anybody to be his successor. The disciples found themselves under the leadership of Gopala Ata, Purusottama Thakur and Mathuradasa respectively. This gave rise to three sub-sects along with the one which was earlier founded by Damodaradeva and Harideva. These sub-sects came to be known as Samhatis meaning associations. Thus there were, Purusa-samhati, Nika-samhati, Kala-samhati and Brahma-samhati.

Purusa-samhati:

This sub-sect was founded by Purusottama Thakur after the death of Madhavadeva. This samhati laid special emphasis on Nama which was one of the four fundamental
elements in the practice of devotion. Chanting and singing in praise of God and meditating on his various forms and names were considered acts of special merit according to this sub-sect. The followers of this sub-sect observed Brahminical rites and might worship the image of Visnu. The position of Sankaradeva was unique in the hierarchy of religious Gurus.

Nika-samhati:

This sub-sect was engineered by Padma Ata, Mathuradasa and Kesava Ata with a view to purify the vaisnava sect by laying stringent rules and conduct of life. The name Nika stood for pure or clean and the followers of this sub-sect were required to observe strict discipline in respect of food, dress and manners and in all religious matters. It laid special emphasis on serving holy association (Sat-sanga). It denounced idol-worship and placed Madhavadeva on the highest rung of the religious hierarchy.

Kala-Samhati:

This association owed its origin to Gopala Ata. This sub-sect gave the supreme position to its Guru. To the followers, the Guru was the God in human form. The followers of this sub-sect were known as Matak. Majority of the disciples were Ahoms, Chutiyas, and ‘Doms’. The influence of Brahminical rituals was reduced to a negligible position.
It was this Samhati which was primarily responsible for bringing to the fold of Vaisnavism the tribals and socially backward communities. The practice of initiating woman was absent in this sub-sect.

Brahma-samhati:

This sect was founded by Damodaradeva and Harideva. It was a Brahminical swing-back to orthodoxy that impelled Damodaradeva to disown his association with the original sect of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. Most of the Satras affiliated to this samhati were headed by Brahmans. The leaders of the Brahma-samhati showed that the Vedic and Puranic rituals and devotional practices were not mutually exclusive. One could be a good Vaisnava even performing daily and occasional rites enjoined by the Dharmasastras. This nature of the sub-sect helped considerably to include the twice-born classes to its fold. It laid more emphasis on Deva, the God and hence approved worship of Visnu image.

Neo-vaisnavism and the Ahoms:

Throughout the history of the Ahom monarchs, they never had a consistant religious policy. And accordingly, religious activities were determined more by the temperament of the kings and as to which sect or cult they patronized. Therefore, like any other popular Hindu-cults in Assam, Neo-Vaisnavism too had a chequered history of its own.
In the initial stage, Mahapurusia-dharma could not gain patronage of the State and Sankaradeva with his followers had to move out to the Koch kingdom around the middle of the sixteenth century A.D. The pioneer reformer like Vamsigopaladeva had to live in hiding for several years when his satra at Kalabari was set on fire under the orders of Burha-Raja Pratapa Simha. The two colleagues of Gopaladeva, Mukunda Gosain and Balabhadra were beheaded. The Kuruwabahi satra was demolished. All these happened "at the instigation of the interested Brahmane" (Gait 1964:p-121).

Later the fourth Adhikara Nityananadaddeva of the Mayamara satra was put to death by Surampha’s order (1641-1644). The three sons of Bar-Yadumani of Bahbari satra were tortured and killed by the king Nariya-Raja. Jayadhvaja Simha (1648-1663), who was a disciple of Brahma-samhati, persecuted and killed the leading members of the Mahapurusiya sub-sect.

When Gadadhara Simha became the king in 1881, he confiscated the properties of satras and idols of deities were either melted down or thrown away. The Adhikara and Gosains of the Dakhinpat satra were blinded, while the Adhikara of the Auniati satra was exiled to Sadiya. Such persecutions were carried out since the king considered the
satras as States within the State and as such might pose a threat to the sovereignty of the State. Moreover, when Gadadhara Simha was wandering from place to place to escape persecution by the then king, he was maltreated by some of the members of the Dakhinpat satra, an incident which later invoked revenge against the satra.

When Rudra Simha came to power (1696), he showed a conciliatory spirit in his attitude towards the Vaisnavite sects. He recalled and reinstated the exiled Gosains. But under the influence of Brahman Gosains, he developed certain prejudices against the non-Brahman Gosains. They were forbidden to initiate or ordain Brahmans. Nevertheless, he maintained such a policy towards the Vaisnava-sects which gave official recognition to a number of satras.

But then, Siva Simha son of Rudra Simha, who was a disciple of a sakta Brahman of Bengal along with his queen Phulesvari, a fanatic sakta, assumed vindictive attitude towards the Thakuria-vaisnavas which later resulted in to the Moamariya rebellion that erupted from time to time. In short, such apathy for the Vaisnavas were seen mostly during the reign of Siva Simha, Rajesvara Simha and Laksmi Simha who were all saktas.
However, towards the later part of the Ahom rule the State's attitude towards vaisnavas started changing. From Jayadhvaja Simha (1649-1663) till Ratnadhvaja Simha (1679-1681 A.D), the monarchs and the nobles became disciples of the vaisnava Gosains. A number of important satras of the eastern Assam were established under the royal patronage. Even an officer, Satriya-Barua, was appointed to look after the workings and management of the satras and to advise and remind the new Adhikara of the duties towards the king and the State.

Later, a new custom in the form of blessing the king by the heads of the principal satras on the occasion of the coronation ceremony came into vogue. Accordingly, the king Pramata Simha (1744-1751), Rajesvara Simha (1751-1769) and Gaurinath Simha (1780-1794) succeeded to the throne. Thus by then, Neo-vaisnavism which hitherto had to face persecutions by the State became the most powerful religious institution under the royal patronage.
B) Social Organization Of The Ahoms:

The Ahoms, a Mao-shan branch of the Tai race of southeast Asia, came to Assam through the Patkai hills of upper Burma (Gogoi 1968: 252). Their traditional social organization was based on nuclear families concentrated into village cells. The concept of state, i.e. Muong centered around a leader in whom the military and the civil functions were equally combined (Buragohain 1988:34) They were basically valley dwellers and had their expertise in wet rice cultivation.

Their traditional social system was known as Ban-muong and it was related to agriculture and based on irrigation by drawing water from the brooks and rivulets by means of constructing dams and dykes. A brief analysis of this system can be made as follows:

The Ban was essentially a unit of social organization. The Ban or Ban Na was composed of nuclear families that settled by the side of brooks or rivulets. A number of such Ban Na together formed a muong. The muong thus
formed was an inter-Ban organization based on hydraulic culture that extended over a large area of agricultural lands.

The muong was headed by a leader who controlled and managed the water resources for the purpose of agriculture. He was considered to be the soul of the earth and water. Therefore, he assumed a deified personality, being solely responsible for the distribution and conservation of the water resources. Such a responsibility often required strong hands to curb down any conflicts that might occur while re-establishing the Ban or muong. The leader thus needed to assume military power as an when necessary. Thus there was gradual development of power from the management of water resources to the management of internal affairs and the subsequent formation of the real muong i.e., the state (Tran-Quoc-Vuông 1984).

The role of myths in the formation of traditional Ahom society could not be ignored. And as such the Ahom kings, throughout their six hundred years of rule, claimed descent from their heavenly ancestor Lengdon, the supreme ruler of heaven. The chronicles of the Ahoms, exclusively mentioned the directive of Lengdon which substantially pointed to the Ahom polity. Some of such directives, were:

"...there is no ruler on earth, I think, the wife of one is forcibly taken by another ...Large fields are lying fallow. These may be well cultivated".
'...You should try to get the hearts of the people with sweet words ... You must always be alert in carrying out state's affairs'.

'...The countries are not properly ruled. The strong oppresses the weak. They live on cultivation ... You must rule the wide countries peacefully. You will take tributes from the people,... Both of you must rule the countries without quarrel,...'.

'...if you quarrel amongst yourself, you are sure to lose your royal power'.

'... the country is full of Tais and slaves. They cannot distinguish right from wrong'.

'...if a person commits a crime, do not kill him at once without fair trial ... If any of them lives by oppressing others, he should be sent to exile...' (Buragohain 1988 : 47).

Guha thus observed that -

"The Ahoms thus believed that they were divinely ordained, firstly, to extend their permanent wet rice culture to areas dominated by large scale following and shifting cultivation, and secondly, to absorb stateless shifting cultivators into a common polity (Guha 1967:128:14, cited in Buragohain 1988 : 48).

The Ahoms within their muong with their king as the leader were divided into numerous divisions, some of which had formerly ascribed ranks and maintained a sort of hereditary aristocracy, while the others were purely functional. Besides the aristocracy, the commoners were mainly divided into:

1. The Chamuas or the gentry.

2. The Kheluwas or the functional sections.

3. The Meldagiyas or the sections assigned to various members of the royal family to serve as attendants.
The Ahoms were traditionally said to have come with seven clans or the Ahoms of seven houses (*The Satghariya Ahom*), of which three clans were royal. From the first clan came the kings, the other two were of the ministerial clans. The *Buragohain* being the senior minister and the *Borgohain*, junior to him. The last three clans were the priestly lineages, *the Deodhai, Mohan, Bailung* and *Chiring*.

The king was the supreme head of the state. The post which was hereditary to one of the following lineages: *Dihingiya, Charingiya, Tungkhungiya, Namrupiya, Samaguriya, Tipamiya*, and *Parvatiya*. The *Buragohain* and the *Borgohain* were placed next to the king. The king ruled the *muong* on the advice of his council of ministers. These lineages were formed as and when the Ahoms left behind a garrison of their own clan members at a number of places that their leader had stayed prior to the establishment of a sedentary life, and as such all these names actually denoted the names of those places.

Later the expansionist attitude of the Ahom king brought under them a large territory which demanded the creation of new administrative posts and thus a new post of *Barpatra Gohain* (Minister-courtier) was created during the
reign of Cu-Hum-Mong (1497-1538). The king Pratap Simha created two new posts of Borbarua and Borphukan being the Secretary General and Governor General. Most of the Borbaruas were selected from the Morans, Kachari, Chiring and Khamti families. The office of the Governor general, lower Assam was appointed from a Chutiya family. These offices were not hereditary and thus could be selected from any families except from the two original ministerial clans.

Many a group from the neighbouring areas were also inducted into a number of important offices. For instance, the Miri Sandikai and the Maran Patar were the officers drawn from the Miris and the Marans. Similarly a number of oracles were included into the Bailung group. Thus there were the Naga Bailung, Miri Bailung and Nara Bailung.

The first Ahom king, after the subjugation of the Barahis, married a Barahi princess when he discovered that the food cooked by her was extremely delicious and thus created a new clan called Changmai, the royal cook, drawn from the Barahi tribe. The descendants of this clan were engaged in various functions associated to the royal kitchen and accordingly eight sub-groups were formed to cater to the need of the kitchen. For example, the groups like the Kathkotia
(fire-wood supplier), Randhani (cook), Kharbatiya (one who prepares a special kind of vegetable soda) etc., came into being.

The commoners were organized in the form of paik or the khel system. An adult male was called a paik, and four paiks constituted a got. The gots were further attached to khels and depending on the nature of duties, the strength of each khel varied from one to three thousand paiks. Each khel was in charge of officers with varying ranks. Twenty paiks were commanded by a Bora, one hundred by a Saikia, one thousand by a Hazarika, three thousand by a Rajkhowa, and six thousand by a Phukan (Gait 1984 : 249). These posts were filled up by any able persons from any families.

Traditionally the Ahoms were an endogamous group following clan exogamy. The Satgharia Ahoms were more rigid in this regard. The practice of maintaining banshawali (genealogies) helped them to avoid unprescribed marriage. The kings and the nobles, however, accepted their consorts even from the common stock (Barua 1978:22). As a rule marriages were restricted between Buragohain and Buragohain, Borgohain and Borgohain, Borpatragohain and Borpatragohain; and within the same khel between Chetia and Chetia, Mohan and Mohan,
Bailung and Bailung, etc. In the case of any breach of such marriage rules, a person was stripped off his clan status and excommunicated. Adultery was dealt with strong hands. Such persons were socially boycotted and forced to live in separate villages specially established for them; and were labelled as Gorias. Among the gentry, the Koch, Kachari, Chutiya, Ahom, Maran and Barahi, married freely among themselves. The affluent Ahoms who enjoyed special status within the state according to their birth looked for Ahom boys for their daughters but their sons could marry from any of the aforesaid groups.

Prior to their migration to Assam they were followers of Tao religion. Tao or Teh means unlimited, unending or the entire cosmos. This Tao in Taoism was the Fra-tra or Fura-tera the supreme super natural power of the Ahoms. When they came to Assam they were followers of a religion which appeared to be a mixture of Taoism and Buddhism in somewhat diluted form and upon which a tinge of tantric Buddhism and Hinduism could be seen. Prior to the advent of Neo-vaishnavism, the Ahom readily accepted the prevalent religion of the land. This was quite evident from the history that they appeased kecaikhati the Chutiya Goddess in Sadiya, worshiped Caraideo in Caraideo and sacrificed animals in
Ram-kha and Devar Gaon Deo-shal (Altar). By then the other groups like the Chutiya, Kachari and Maran etc., all of whom also had migrated from southeast Asia, had imbibed Hinduism to some extent. The Ahoms who later came to Assam, and started living with these autocthonous perhaps became attracted to Hinduism (Gogoi 1985:23). However, the Ahoms took four hundred years to be recognized as Hindus and it was during the reign of Rudra Simha (1696) that Hinduism became a state religion.

The Ahoms were outside the purview of the caste system. Citizens from all caste and creed were treated equally. Only the royal families along with the ministerial families held a special status according to their birth in the respective clans. Other officers of the royal court enjoyed a social status according to their official ranks. Later, when Hinduism became the state religion, the gentry were divided into a number of classes like the Brahman, Kayastha, Kalita, Keot, Koch and Kachari, etc.

The Ahoms had a strong administrative policy; rewards and punishments were equally meted out as and when required. Only the Brahmins and women were free from capital punishment. Even the Gosains and Mahantas were punished in the case of any breach of social norms. Officers
of higher ranks were also not spared from such treatment. The king, Buragohain, Borgohain, Borpatragohain and Borphukan could declare capital punishment. Higher officers could also hear and settle disputes among the paiks and award punishment of lesser degree. However, the persons so punished by these officers could appeal to the king for a better hearing.

kinship:

The Ahom commoners were divided into different phaids or khels on the basis of their specific, assigned occupation and their hereditary status. Thus in a traditional Ahom society, the hereditary aristocracy (Sat-gharia Ahom) on the one hand and specific occupation on the other, helped in the growth of Ahom social organization in terms of phaid. The hereditary aristocracy was maintained with the practice of writing Banshavali, i.e., genealogy and the occupational status of the phaid was assigned by the royal court. Each phaid was again divided into sub-phaids.

Endogamy to a large extent was maintained by restricting their marriage within the Ahom community. It was a strong patriarchal society and the people traced their descent through males to a common ancestry. Marriage was not permitted, not only within the same phaid, but also among the other sub-phaids of the same phaid. The exogamous nature of
phaid, as Barua (1978:104) said, could be compared to some extent with the clan and lineage group. The members of each phaid were widely dispersed throughout upper Assam. Nevertheless, membership to a specific phaid signified that they were the descendants of a common ancestor.

Members of the sub-phaid were equally affected by ritual pollution whenever occasion arose. But it was not possible to maintain functional integrity due to spatial dispersal of kinsmen (Barua 1978:109).

Kinship system of the Ahoms was distinctive as it followed seniority on the basis of ascending generations rather than on age. In course of their long contact with other autochthons in Assam, there had been partial changes in the kinship terms; nevertheless, certain terms like Nisadeo, Epadeo, enaideo, Puthadeo, Athao, Pulin, Aputi, etc., were retained. For instance:

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<th>Terms Of Reference</th>
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<td>Nisadeo</td>
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</tr>
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