

## A Study on the Social Life of the Ahom Priestly Class

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### Abstract

The Ahoms were originally a group of Tai Shans. They brought a distinct culture to Assam peculiar to the Tai culture. Although the Ahoms had their own religious customs and rituals but they did not impose their religion to other tribes and distinctly amalgamated with the culture of the local people. In the time being the Ahoms accepted Hinduism and with the advent of the neo-vaishnavism they almost lost their culture. However the Mohan Deodhai and the Bailungs, the three priestly clans of the Ahoms did not accept Hinduism and maintained their own culture and habits to a great extent. The Ahoms possess a distinct character regarding the social life. The Ahom priestly class who were neglected for their denial of Hinduism in later part of the Ahom rule, became secluded from the other part of the society. The Mohan, Deodhais and the Bailungs maintained their traditional beliefs and customs in the long period of the Ahom rule and they are still preserving their tradition. So, it is necessary to look at the condition of the Ahom priestly class that how and what extent they could maintain their own culture.

**KEYWORDS:** Customs, Rituals, Ahom Priestly Class, Social life, Tradition etc.

### INTRODUCTION:

Before the arrival of the Ahoms, the whole of the eastern Kamrup was under the tribal kings. Like Chutiyas, the Morans, the Barahis and the Kacharis were ruling in the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley. In the western part which retained the old name of the kingdom of Kamrupa, and later came to be known as Kamata, a line of Hindu kings were ruling with their capital at Kamatapur.

At the time of the advent of the Ahoms, the people of the Brahmaputra Valley were composed of two broad divisions- the Hindus and the non-Hindu tribes. Among the Hindus brahmanas, kayasthas, ganakas, kalitas, keots etc. formed the majority of population. However among the non-Hindu tribes, Chutiyas, Kacharis, Maranas formed the majority of population.<sup>1</sup> The Ahoms ruled in Assam for six hundred long years. However the term Ahom does not mean a particular caste of tribe, or race like Koch, Kalita, or Keot. It implies a community or clan or group consisting of several families.<sup>2</sup> Similarly all the Ahoms did not belong to a homogeneous class. Through centuries from Sukapha onwards, persons, families and groups from various tribes and castes- Morans, Barahis, Chutiyas, Kacharis, hill tribes (Nagas, Miris, Daflas, Mikirs, Garos) etc. The Bhuyans, the Kalitas and Brahmanas were slowly being absorbed in Ahom society and raised in the social order.<sup>3</sup> The seven principal Ahom clans or phoids were known as satgharia Ahom or the Ahoms of the seven houses. The first three houses were the royal family, the Buragohain family and the Bargohain family. According to some the remaining four phoids were the Deodhai, Mohan, Bailung and Chiring families of priests and astrologers.

### OBJECTIVE:

The main objective of this study is to highlight the social life i.e. education, dress pattern, food habits, language etc. of the Ahom Priestly class.

**METHODOLOGY:**

The approach of this study is historical and exploratory in nature. To serve the purpose of the topic, both conventional and analytical methods of investigation are followed.

**DISCUSSION:**

The social life of the Ahom Priestly class was not different from other Ahom people. Since the Mohan Deodhai and the Bailungs did not accept Hinduism during the days of the Ahom rule, a separate study has been undertaken on them. When Hinduism made its way into the Ahom court and in the kingdom, the Mohan, Deodhai and the Bailungs did not accept Hinduism and they stuck to their age old traditional beliefs and customs. They resisted the Ahom Kings from accepting Hinduism. They were not successful in preventing the incursion of Hinduism and in turn became a neglected class in the Ahom Court. Although the Ahom kings performed the traditional Ahom traditional rites and rituals till the end of the Ahom rule, they were more inclined towards Hinduism. After the fall of the Ahom kingdom, the satra institutions became powerful and all the Ahoms except the Mohan, Deodhai and the Bailungs took initiation from the satras and more or less gave away their traditional way of life in this period. The Ahom Priestly Class did not accept saranas from the satras and in this period they were socially neglected in their day to day life. Even the Ahoms boycotted the priestly class in social life. Hence it is necessary to look at the social life of the Ahom priestly class.

**DRESS PATTERN:** During the long rule of 600 years, the Ahom traditional dress has gone under significant changes from time to time. From the appearance of a person, one could identify without any difficulty as particular dresses and jewelleryes being assigned to them.

Now a-days, common dress for men include unsewn cotton cloth for lower part of the body called dhoti or churia or pha nai or pha rem. Similarly the upper part of the body is covered with by wearing a shirt or pha ciu. Elderly people wear a turban pha hu or pha chau made of cotton cloth. However some people prefer gamucha or pha ciet on shoulder. Gamucha is also used as a turban. In winter season, body is wrapped by either coarse cotton or endi silk or phok bunh pha. However dresses of a woman include mekhela or pha chien which is a lower garment that can be worn by above the breast or around the breast. The upper part of the body is covered by a blouse or pha chuo. Moreover an unsewn cloth called chadar or pha bai or pha mai is worn on top of the pha chien.<sup>4</sup>

**LANGUAGE:** Originally the Tai-Ahoms were Tai speakers. However Tai was the mother language for an initial period of time in their rule in Assam. But they gradually lost their mother language and became speaker of Assamese language. From the sixteenth century onwards Assamese language was used in the Ahom court. The Ahom Priestly class, the preserver of the Ahom tradition did not lost their identity of Tai language till the 18th century. However with the passes of time they lost the speaking of Tai language. Although they lost the speaking of Tai language, they did not abandon the Tai language wholly. Some molungs of Tai-Ahom priestly class used to spread the knowledge of Tai language by the system of Tai language 'tul'. Although the Tai-Ahom language has lost its character as a popular speech and having been confined today in some villages, the volumes of writings, preserved through the original Tai chronicles, historical and otherwise, religious and secular, bear the testimony that Tai-Ahom language had a glorious past.<sup>5</sup> The language at present speak by the Tai-Ahoms is a variant of Assamese language with a mixture of Tai-Ahom words, Ahomised Assamese words and transliterated Assamese words of Tai-Ahom origin with Tai-Ahom pattern of sentence and tones.<sup>6</sup> Now a days, the Ahom Priestly Class that is the Mohan, Deodhai and the Bailungs are also the speaker of the Assamese language.

**FOOD HABITS:** The Ahoms were liberal in their attitude towards dietary habits. Rice, pulses, fish and milk were the staple diet of both the aristocracy and the commoners.<sup>7</sup> According to the Padshahnamah, they ate 'every land and water animal'. According to Fathiyyah-i-Ibriyyah, they 'took of every kind of meat.' Gadadhar Singha's favourite dish was coarse spring rice and a calf 3 roasted in ashes.<sup>8</sup> Originally the Ahoms did not impose any restrictions regarding the food habits. They took everything that can be consumed be it flesh of cattle, buffalo, swine and fowls etc. During the Ahom rule due to the scarcity of salt it was replaced by khaar.

Neo-Vaisnavism brought about a certain change in the food habits of the people, so that taking of meat of certain animals and birds traditionally unclean by the Hindus were becoming a general taboo.<sup>9</sup> The food of the Ahoms who were not Hinduised consisted of pork and fowls. They drank rice beer like many other tribes of Assam.<sup>10</sup> The Mohan, Deodhai and the Bailungs who did not accept Hinduism and not took saranas from the satras did not go through such changes during the medieval period. They maintained their food habits such as eating of pork, making and drinking haj or laopani or rice beer etc. to a great extent. In every religious function of home, it is a mandatory for the priestly class to take rice beer and pork. It was only after the rule of the British that several Hindu customs made their way into their society.

Now a days, the priestly class as well as the Ahoms did not take any food that is considered as taboo by the society. However some dishes are considered as ethnic Ahom dishes still prevalent among the common masses. Some dishes such as pork made with rice flour that is called Chik Chak by the Priestly class people is specially prepared in some religious function.

**STATUS OF WOMEN:** Ahom women do not suffer from the disabilities of Hindu women. In other parts of India Hindu women suffer greatly from certain social customs and institutions. But the Ahom women are free from such disabilities. An Ahom woman does not suffer as such social customs do not exist in Ahom society. A woman does not loose claim on the household authority after the loss of her husband, rather she assumes the headship of the family unless disabled by old age or physical disabilities. Women played an important role in important family affairs. Besides rearing up her children and doing her household duties, she helped cultivation in every stag except ploughing.<sup>11</sup>

Earlier Ahom women moved about without having any veil on their head. Sihabuddin Taalish when he was in upper Assam in 1662-63 was surprised to see this to remark, "Neither the women of the Rajah, nor those of common people, veil themselves; they go about in the bazaars without head-coverings." This practice was applicable to all women, even to the widows as well.<sup>12</sup> But with the influence of Hinduism several new rules and customs made their way into the Ahom society. However women of the Ahom Priestly class that is the Mohan, Deodhais and Bailungs maintained their identity to a great extent. It can be presumed that the Hindu custom of marking the forehead and covering the head with veil was a late entity among them. It was in the first half of the twentieth century that several changes were noticed among them. Even today in some villages of Patsaku area, women did not mark forehead.

**EDUCATION:** The Ahoms considered knowledge of buranjis as indispensable. Every respectable Ahom considered writing and preservation of buranjis to be a sacred duty. Naturally the Ahoms had keen interest in the study of history. Learning of language which only could facilitate study of buranjis was also therefore looked upon as a part of duty. During Chaklang or Ahom marriage ceremonies there was the practice of reciting buranjis

and so whether by reading or by listening to recitation, the Ahoms learnt history. Generally Ahom pundits or the molungs taught the learning of buranjis by the system of 'tul'.

With the adoption of Assamese by the rulers, the use and culture of the Ahom language no doubt diminished, but the same continued to be learnt and used till the end of the Ahom rule. To give knowledge on Ahom language, Ahom Pundits were employed. The Chief Pundit for the service to the State was granted 700 puras of land and 20 attendants. Other Pali Pundits or subordinate Pundits or helpers were granted 6 puras of land and 2 paik each.<sup>13</sup> Chiring Phukan and Barchiring Barua were the two officers who had entrusted with the duty of teaching of the Ahom language, promotion of study of buranjis and writing of books in Ahom language and their preservation etc. After learning the Ahom alphabets, the students had to learn grammar and keep memory of amra or dictionary and after this were able to reading of books and ultimately to the study of Ahom religious scripts and buranjis.<sup>14</sup> Sons of almost all respectable Ahoms and particularly of Deodhais, Mohans and Bailungs of the Ahom priestly class used to be trained in the Ahom language. Although during the Ahom period there was not any system of public education but there were several learned people. Ahom pundits or molungs taught people through the system of tul.

**BURIAL CUSTOM:** Before the acceptance of Hinduism, the Ahoms buried their dead. Shihabuddin Talish describes Ahom burial procedures 'The common people bury their dead with some of the property of the deceased, placing the head towards the east and the feet towards the west.'<sup>15</sup> The death of a king was not announced till the appointment a new king. In this regard the chief molung appointed by the king made necessary arrangement about the burial procedure of the king. But with the influence of Hinduism, Ahom burial custom was replaced by the system of cremation. In the year 1769 when Rajeshwar Singh died, his body was cremated and the sraddha ceremony was performed according to Brahmanical rites. It was from that time inaugurated the custom of burning the dead bodies of Ahom kings and of performing the sraddha according to Brahmanical rites.<sup>16</sup>

All the Ahoms except the Priestly class that is the Mohan, Deodhai and the Bailungs had abandoned their traditional system of burial and accepted the Hindu system of cremation. However the Mohan, Deodhai and the Bailungs continued to buried their dead and still they preserve this age old Ahom tradition. With the beginning of the Ahom revival movement, several Ahom people started to bury their dead.

**MARRIAGE CUSTOM:** The Ahoms followed their traditional marriage custom that is Chaklang. Brahmanical rituals were observed when the Ahom kings married Hindu girls. Then, however, they married Ahom damsels, Chaklang i.e. rite of original Ahom form of marriage, used to be gone through.<sup>17</sup> Although the Hinduisation process had begun with the reign of Jayadvaj Singha who adopted Hinduism and established Vaisnava satras and the monasteries, the Ahoms had converted, yet they refused to give up all their cultural heritage and faith in their religion.<sup>18</sup>

Padmeswar Gogoi in his book 'Tai Ahom Religion and Customs' has given a description about the Ahom Marriage custom-

"The Ahom marriage is exogamous as between the clans. No marriage is permissible within the clan but one can marry from another clan within the community. No marriage can take place among the members of the families extending in the male line. For instance, if the bridegroom is Borgohain his bride cannot be of the same Borgohain family, because they both belong to the same Borgohain clan. The same rule applies to any other clan such as Buragohain, Handikoi, Lahan, Duara and so on."<sup>19</sup>

In the same way, the Ahom Priestly Class that is the Mohan, Deodhai and the Bailungs don't marry themselves within the same clan. Another interesting thing in the Mohan, Deodhai clans is that Mohans cannot marry Borgohains as the original Borgohain was the son of Mohung while the Changbun and the Buragohain being brothers, Deodhais cannot marry Buragohains.<sup>20</sup>

The Mohan, Deodhai and the Bailungs followed the Chacklang custom when they married. However with the acceptance of Hinduism common public more or less abandoned this custom. With the arrival of the British, Ahoms began to take saranas from the satras. In this way among the Ahoms in place of traditional marriage rites, marriage rites reciting nama-prasanga was gradually becoming popular. Now a days, both ckaklang and the traditional marriage custom that is prevalent in the Assamese society is both observed by the people of the priestly class.

### CONCLUSION:

The Ahoms came to the Brahmaputra valley in the thirteenth century and their rule in Assam came to be known as a significant event in the history of Assam. They united all the tribes politically and created the backbone of the Assamese culture. They came to Assam with a peculiar religious beliefs and customs. But with the time being, they amalgamated with the local tribes and created a mixture of culture. But they somehow maintained their some original traits also. In the time being they became adherents of Hinduism. Although the Ahom kings accepted Hinduism as a religion, they did not forbid their religion and culture in large extent. They somewhat managed to preserve their traditional beliefs and customs.

After the decline of the Ahom rule, the whole political situation of the North east India has gone through a significant change. The British occupied Assam and introduced several changes to run the day to day administration to their own benefit. The Ahoms who were the ruler prior to the British, have gone through a significant change in every sphere of social as well as religious life. They became adherent to the neo-vaishnavism and took saranas from the satras. But the Ahom Priestly Class i.e. The Mohan, Deodhais and the Bailungs maintained their traditional beliefs and customs to a great extent. Now a days, although majority of them accepted Hinduism, but they still preserve their traditional religious beliefs and customs.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES:

<sup>1</sup>S.L., Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2009, p.414.

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> H.K., Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol-III, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati, 2007, p.84.

<sup>4</sup> Annajyoti, Gogoi, *Ethnobotany of The Tai Ahoms of Upper Assam*, p.h.d. thesis submitted to Gauhati University, 1997, p.14.

<sup>5</sup> Lila, Gogoi, *Tai Sanskritir Ruprekha*, Banalata, 1994, p.81.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> S.L., Baruah, *op.cit.*, p.420.

<sup>8</sup> Nirmal, Basu, *The Social and Cultural Conditions under The Ahoms*, p.h.d. thesis submitted to Gauhati University, 1966, p.264

<sup>9</sup> S.L., Baruah, *op.cit.*, p.421.

<sup>10</sup> E.A., Gait, *op.cit.*, p.263.

<sup>11</sup> S.L., Baruah, *op.cit.*, p.422.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Lila, Gogoi, *op.cit.*, p.202.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Nirmal, Basu, *op.cit.*, p.266.

<sup>16</sup> E.A., Gait, *op.cit.*, p.264.

<sup>17</sup> Nirmal, Basu, *op.cit.*, p.268.

<sup>18</sup> P., Gogoi, *Tai Ahom Religion and Customs*, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati, 1976, p.64.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> B.K., Gohain, *op.cit.*, p.104.