

Ahom Religion and changing Religious life in the Ahom Society: A case study at Ahom Gaon of Golaghat district in Assam

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Abstract

Assam is situated at the heart of northeast India and the meeting ground of different ethnic groups, communities and cultural entities since time immemorial. Among them Ahom is one of the major ethnic groups in Assam. They entered Assam through the crossed of Patkai Hills in 1228 A.D and ruled about 600 years. They had their own culture, language and religious belief and practices. When they entered Assam having integrated with the local people and socially, linguistically, culturally assimilated with them. For the first few decades they maintained their own faith and language but with the expansion of their boundary they wisely opted for the language and religion of the majority. But in the course of history they adopted Assamese language and embraced Hinduism. The present paper is aimed to analyse the Ahom religion and religious life of the Ahom society in the present day.

Key Words: ethnic groups, Ahom, religious belief and practices.

Introduction

Assam is situated at the heart of northeast India and the meeting ground of different ethnic groups, communities and cultural entities since time immemorial. The inhabitants of Assam are a broad racial intermixture of Mongolian, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan origin. The state has the largest number of ethnic groups like Bodo (or Kachari), Karbi, Kosh-Rajbanshi, Miri/Mishing, Mishimi, Rabha, Ahom etc. within their variety in tradition, culture, religious beliefs and practices, dresses, and exotic way of life. Among them Ahom is one of the major ethnic groups in Assam. They entered Assam through the crossed of Patkai Hills in 1228 A.D and ruled about 600 years. They were a branch of great Tai race and belonged particularly to Shan section thereof, which occupied the Northern and Eastern hill tracts of upper Burma and Western Yunnan (Basu, 1970). Linguistically they belong to the Siamese-Chinese branch of the Sino-Tibetan language. They brought with them their own Tai language and script. They were worshippers of *Phura Tara Along* (Ever-Luminous God) and few tribal deities including Lengden, the king of heaven. They also brought with them practice of writing chronicles (*Buranjees*). The founder of Ahom kingdom Sukapha first established their territory in Upper Brahmaputra valley and gradually they extended their territory down the Brahmaputra valley. They had their own culture, language and religious belief and practices. When they entered Assam having integrated with the local people and socially, linguistically, culturally assimilated

with them. For the first few decades they maintained their own faith and language but with the expansion of their boundary they wisely opted for the language and religion of the majority. But in the course of history they adopted Assamese language and embraced Hinduism.

The present paper is aimed to analyse the Ahom religion and religious life of the Ahom society in the present day. The study has been conducted at Ahom Gaon under the revenue circle of Golaghat in Golghat district of Assam. The village is situated in Golaghat district of Athgaon Mouza in the South side on the border of Assam and Nagaland. It is situated on the 15kms distance from Golaghat town of Assam.

Objective of the study

The present paper is based on following objectives:

1. To analyse the Ahom Religion
2. To analyse the process of Hinduism among the Ahoms
3. To understand the religious life of the Ahom society in a village setting

Methodology

The present paper is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data are collected from Ahom Gaon village of the Ghat District of Assam through structured interview scheduled. The present study covers 65 Ahom household from the village. The data are collected through observation, informal discussion and administration of a structured interview schedule. The secondary data are collected from books, magazines, articles.

The religion of Ahoms

The Ahoms believe in an all-powerful God who created the universe. Gait (2005) has identified the Supreme Being of the Ahoms as *Pha*. According to R.Buragohain (2007), mentioned Ahom religion that “they were partly Hinayana Buddhist, partly Tantric Buddhist, partly animists and finally they had their own form of ancestor-worship together with many gods and spirits. The influence of Tao religious thought is also discernible in the Ahom religion”. It is argued that the Tais accepted Buddhism before their advent to Assam and that the Ahoms were in the first stage Buddhism (Gogoi, 1985). P.Gogoi (1976) mention that “the Buddhist elements in Ahom rituals but he argued that Ahom religious beliefs is mainly based on the ‘supernatural powers’ formless spirits or *nats* invoked with rice, eggs, flowers and sometimes with animal scarifies but without the icons of gods for the purpose of worship”. B.J. Tiwari(1980) mentioned that worship of Somdeo or *Chumpha* is the icon of Ahom god. Ahom system of propitiations, oblations to the gods generally begins with the prayer *Cao-phra*, *Chao-Tra*, *Chao-Nu-Ru*, *Chao-Kao-Oil* with head high towards the sky and bowing down before the image of any deity. Therefore it can be said that Ahoms is worship *Chumpha* in mental or imaginary plane and greatly influence Tai religious culture such as Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and even Hinduism before the advent of the Ahoms to Assam.

Therefore, it can be said that Ahom are the section of great Tai race and they have known their capacity of assimilative. In this regard when they arrived in Assam, they immediate concern

their defiance and religious problem through the process of assimilation and were called ‘Ahom’ by the indigenous people. Because, it is said that the indigenous tribes namely Moran, the Borahi, the Kacharies ruled in the Brahmaputra valley at the time of Ahom entered in Assam. Those tribes had animistic tribal features (R.Buragohain, 2007). But Ahom adopt their culture, language, religion and assimilated with them. Ahom celebrations religious functions such as *Umpha*, *Saiphā* with sacrifices of animal, which is animistic in nature. This indicates that Ahom was animistic belief and it synchronized with their political socialization with identical practices.

It is true that Ahom socially and culturally assimilated with the local tribes in the Brahmaputra valley, but Ahom could not forsake in totality the Tai trait in their religious attitude. Ahom religious concept is related to their state called them *mong* concept. Ahom belief that *Phi-mong* is the protecting of the whole state (*mong*), embracing the *Phi-bans*, the protecting spirit of each village stretching sometime *Phi-huene* of each household. In this regard R. Buragohain (2007) writes that “*Phi-huen* is individual localized while *Phi-ban* like the *Phi-mong* has not only included all inhabitants but also territory including forests, water, domestic animals and the game on the land and water. The Ahom thus propitiated a number of gods; the Lengdon being the foremost *Phi-Mung* followed by other gods in hierachal order”.

Process of Hinduism among the Ahoms

Ahom had followed their own religion for the first two centuries and after that some political, social and after the subjugated the Chutiays and Bhuyans kingdom the process of Ahomisation gave way to Hinduisation. It was Sudangpha *alise* Bamuni Konwar (1398-1407), who intrusion of the Brahminical cult of the Hindu religion in the Ahom royalty. When Sudangpha shifted his capital to Charagua near the Dihing he performed a coronation ceremony called *Singari-ghar utha*, as the coronation hall on the occasion had to be constructed with *Singari* wood. The ceremony was performed according to the Ahom rites but it was possible that his Brahmin foster-father blessed him with Vedic *mantras* when the king assumed the Hindu tittles *Maharaja* and *Rajrajeswar Chakravarty* (Boruah, 2007). Sudangpha also appointed Brahmana as an advisor in the Ahom administration. Thus during Sundangpha’s reign the seeds of Hinduism were sown in the Ahom kingdom. The Brahmin had brought with him worship of Lord Vishnu. The worship of Vishnu continued along with that of the Ahom deity *Chom-Cheng* (*Chomdeo*).

Sutyinpha or Jayadhvaj Singh (1648-1663) was the first Ahom king to formally accept Hinduism, who wanted to propitiate the gods by his devotion to religion and atone for his patricide. Jayadhvaj Singh and his successors up to Sulikpha or Lora Raja (1679-1681) accepted Vaishnavism as their creed, which was the predominant faith in Assam at that time. Later kingdoms were influenced by the Hindu religion and they patronized the Hindu religion in Assam. During the end of the reign of Rudra Simha(1696-1714) the Ahom Kingdom became a Hindu state. The process of Hinduisation helped the Ahoms to develop their socio-cultural, religion life and expansion of territory in Assam.

The process of Hinduisation had change the socio-religious and cultural identity of the Ahoms. After the influence of Brahminical cult of Hindu religion, Ahom king maintain two names one Hindu and other of Ahom. Suhungmung or Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) was the first king to assume Hindu name Swarga-Narayan. He also introduced Hindu calendar Sakra-Era and replacing the system of calculating date by Jibon Cycle of sixty years.

The influences of Hinduism also change the dead cremation system of the Ahom. Originally, Ahom buried their dead body. Since the time of Surampha or Rajeswar Singh (1751-1769) the Ahom kings took to cremation and performed their funeral activities according to Vedic rites (Boruah, 2007). After influence of Hinduism Ahom kings patronized both Ahom priests and Brahmins and allowed them to perform their rituals.

Later some of the Ahom kings patronized Vaishnavism and zealously established *Satras* and allocated large areas of revenue free land. They greatly influenced the Brahminical sect of Hindu religion and established number of Temple and Satras in different part of the Brahmaputra valley Brahmin influence grew rapidly in the capital and the Vaishnava movement of Sankardeva was making itself felt more and more in the north-western part of the kingdom.

Neo-vaishnavism and Ahom

Towards the closing decade of 15th century a socio-religious reformed movement was launched by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568). He was the founder of Neo-Vaisnavism movement and was the social circumstance in Assam. He was first time brought the message of Bhakti culture in Assam which could not be measured and compared. He enlightened the people of Assam and North-East region by social, moral, religion and spiritual teachings which were helped to build Assamese society. He was the founder of *Ek Saran Nam Dharma*. He used the tool of culture to peace his Socio-religion ideology. His *Dharma* (Religion) based on Bhati Culture where worship only Krishna or Visnu. It was castles culture and through this culture he tried to established an egalitarian society in Assam not only Assam gradually it expanded the whole India. Sankardeva was the social reformer and the great nation builder. His was gave the new faith in his religion *Mahapurusia-Dharma or Vaisnavism*. It was based on the relation between Krishna the worshiped object and the Bhakti worshipping Subject. He was not interested on a philosophy of religion, for he knew that the society was more need for reformation than a system of philosophy. The essence of ‘Bhakti’ was mainly derived from ‘Bhagavata-Purana’ and ‘Gita’. Sankardeva was avoiding the traditional ritualism of worshipped different God and Goddess which were prevalent during his time in many parts of Assam as well as India. He also opposed the Hindu social system where caste system was dominating the society. Thus, he uphold the super-excellence religion of the Bhagavata and chanting the name of supreme Lord. His religion was based on the complete surrender to Lord and is known as ‘Ekasarania’. According to his view in the eye of god all man are equal irrespective of their race, religion and caste all equal. According to Sankardeva Bhakti was the path of knowledge. The Bhakti worship was the part of the culture which helps to moral development of a person. So, Sankaradeva was established ‘Satra’ and ‘Namghar’(temple) those are the part of his ‘Bhakt’

culture. Through the Satra(Monasteries) and Namghar Sankardeva gave the teaching of *Bhagavata Puran*, daily *Kirton reading* in the Satra institution and also give the socio- cultural, religion, moral, spiritual teaching through Bhouna. Bhouna is a kind of acting on the story of Mahabharata, Ramayana and Purana. The plays had to stage throughout the night. A home- made stage was erected in an open field or in front of a *Namghar* (Temple). The whole play included narration pertaining to the epic or great traditions of Mahabharata, Ramayana or Purana, through continuous narration in dialogue format.

In the initial stage Mahapurusia-dharma could not gain patronage in the Ahom state and Sankaradeva with his followers had to move out to the Koch Kingdom around the middle of sixteen century. Towards, the later part of the Ahom rule the state attitude towards vaisnavas started to changing (Gogoi, 2006). A large number of Satra were established under the Ahom royal patronage and give the land to Vaisnva gosains to established satras. Also to look and management of satras an officer was appointed known as Satriya Barua. 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.

Sect. of Religion

The sect. of religion is classified into four categories on the basis of respondents responds, namely- 1. Bamuniya (it is a sect. of Hindu religion, who perform their religious rituals with the help of Brahmin ‘Puruhit’) 2.Tai (traditional Tai religious group), 3. Sankar Sangha (Sankar Sangha’ is a popular term which has effect on Assam lately. The people who are in Sankar Sangha have utmost faith upon “Mahapurush Sankardeva”. They do not believe god and goddesses) and 4. Bhagoboti (it refers those religious believers who have immense faith in *The Bhagabat* and follow the ideas therein while performing any religious activities). The distribution of respondents’ sect. of religion into those categories is shown in the table-1

Table -1
Sect. of Religion

Sl. No	Sect. of Religion	Frequency	Percentage
1	Brahmuniya	35	53.80%
2	Tai	1	1.54%
3	Sankar Sangha	24	36.92%
4	Bhagoboti	05	7.74%
Total		65	100

The data show that in the study village 53.80% of respondents families sect of religion is Bamuniya, 1.54% of respondents families set of religion is Tai, 36.92% of respondents’ families’ sect. of religion is Sankara Sangha and 7.74% of respondents sect. of religion is Bhagoboti, Thus it can be said that most (53.80%) of the respondents families in the study village is belong Brahmuniya sect of religion.

Table No. 2
Respondent views on perform Religious Activity in a year at Home

Sl. No	Perform religious Activity	Frequency	Percentage
1	Nam-Kirton	18	27.70%
2	Bhagobot Path	10	15.38%
3	Tai religious activities	01	1.54%
4	Nam-Kriton+Bhagobat Path	25	38.46%
5	Nam-Kriton+Bhagobat Path+Puja	11	16.92%
Total		65	100%

The data shows that in the study village 27.70% of respondents' families who perform religious activity *Nam-Kirton*, 15.38% of respondents families perform religious activity *Bhagobot Path*, 1.54% respondents families perform religious activity Ahom traditional Tai religious activity such as *Phura-long puja*, *Ja-Shing-Pha puja* etc., 38.46% of respondents families perform religious activity *Nam-Kriton+Bhagobat Path*, and 16.92% of respondents' families perform religious activities *NamKirton+ Bhagobat path+ Puja* in a year. Thus, we can say that in the study village change have been taken place to perform religious activities due to the adoption of vaisnavism (Eka Saran Bhagovati Dharma).

Table No. 3
Performing traditional Ahom ritual

Sl. No	Performed	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	1	1.54%
2	No	64	98.46%
Total		65	100%

The data shows that in the study village only 1.54% of respondents' family perform their traditional religious ritual such as-*Phuralung*, *yasingfa puja*, *langkhusi puja*, *laksmi narayan salagran* etc. while 98.46% of respondents do not perform traditional Ahom religious rituals. Thus, it can be assumed that majority (98.46%) of the respondents have left performing traditional Ahom rituals due to the adoption of Hinduism particularly vaishnavism.

Regarding the question of following dharma guru

The respondents respond that all the respondents follow dharma guru. The following of dharma guru is classified into 3 categories: 1. Sankardeva, 2. Phura and 3. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. The distribution of these 3 categories is shown in table-no.-4

Table No. 4
Respondents views on follow Dharma Guru

Sl. No	Dharma Guru	Frequency	Percentage
1	Sankardeva	60	92.31%
2	Phura	01	1.54%

3	Sankardeva+Madhabdeva	04	6.15%
	Total	65	100%

The data shows that in the study village 92.31% of respondents' families follow vaisnava saint Sankardeva as dharma guru, 1.54% of respondents families follow Phura as their dharma guru and 6.15% of respondents' families follow both Sankardeva and Madhavdeva as their dharma guru. Thus it can be said that majority of the respondents families follow Sankardeva as their dharma guru and Sankardeva neo-vaishnavism religion has been playing an important role in the religious side in the study village.

Table No. 5
Respondents views on worshipping god and goddess

Sl. No	Worshipped god and goddess	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	23	35.38%
2	No	42	64.62%
	Total	65	100%

Due to the influence of Sankardeva *neo-vaishnavism* religion most of the village people have followed the practice of *eka-sarana naam-dharma*-“the religion of taking refuge with the one God only”. Table 5 shows that in the study village 35.38% of respondents' families worship different gods and goddess, while 64.62% of respondents' families do not worship gods and goddess.

Regarding question of respondents' having the membership of SSS (Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha)

Srimant Sankardeva Sangha was established in the year 1930 based on the philosophy of Sakardeva neo-Vaishnavism movement known as *Eka-saran-Naam Dharm*. The main objective of Sangha is to spread the philosophy of Srimanta Sankardeva and establish equality among the people of the society.

Table No. 6
Respondents views on having the membership of SSS

Sl. No	Member of SSS	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	14	21.54%
2	No	51	78.46%
	Total	65	100%

The data shows that in the study village 21.54% of respondents are the member of SSS and 78.46% of respondents do not have the membership of SSS.

Cremate death

Traditionally Ahoms had followed the practice of burring in the case of cremated death body before they adopted Hinduism. This system is known as *moidam*. But in later years, following

the Hindu custom they cremated their dead. Cremate death is classified into two categories: 1. *Moidam* and 2. Burn. The distribution of cremate death is shown in below.

Table No.7
Respondents views on cremate Death body

Sl. No	Cremate Death	Frequency	Percentage
1	<i>Moidam</i> (buried system)	1	1.54%
2	Burn	64	98.46%
	Total	65	100%

The data shows that in the study village, in the case of cremated death body 98.46% of respondents' families burn while only 1.54% of respondents' families cremate *Moidum*(buried system) after the death of their family members. Thus it can be said that all most all the respondents' families burn their dead bodies after adopting Hindu religion. So, traditional Ahom societies' cremate death practice of *Moidum* have been changed in the study village.

Namghar(prayer hall) is a seat of religious activities within the *satra* and through Namghar Sankardeva and his Followers spread the vaisnavism amongst the various communities in Assam. In the study Village, the people rotationally take care of daily *Namghar* and lights the lamps in the evening. In this Namghar the village people participated various religious activities like *Janmastami*, *nam-Kriton*, *Bhouma*, *Sankara Janmutsaba*, *Abirata Bhagobot Path* etc.

Conclusion

The religious life of the Ahom society is changing, which also change their social structure. The study reveals that cent percent respondents in the Ahom Gaon village are the Hindu and their mother tongue Assamese. The traditional Ahom religious beliefs and practice is almost cent percent (98.46%) changed and decline to Vaishnavism (Mahapursua Dharma). The village people mainly perform religious activity such as-Bhagowat path, Nama-Kirton and follow Sankardeva and Madhavdeva as their dharma guru. The study also reveals that due to influence of revivalist movement among the Ahom 1.54% of people again convert their Tai religion and follow traditional religious beliefs and practices.

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