Ahoms Dynasty

The Ahoms are members of the Shan branch of Tai family of South-East Asia who migrated to Assam early in the 13th century. They had a very keen sense of history; and their priests and families possessed Buranjis (histories), which were periodically updated. They were written on strips of bark and carefully passed on from one generation to the next.

Sukapha, who was the founder of the Ahom dynasty, migrated from Maulung (now in Myanmar) with some of his followers. In 1228, he entered Assam assimilating many kingdoms on his way. This kingdom gradually covered the whole of modern Assam/Brahmaputra valley some centuries later.

Cultural History of Ahoms

The Tai-Ahom religion is based on certain fundamental beliefs in supernatural powers. They believed in an omnipotent God (pha-tu-ching) apart from believing in a hierarchy of gods that owe their origin to the Great God. Ancestral worship was also common. Ahoms even have their own theory of creation.

The Royal family was in possession of two deities called Chum and Sheng which were carefully preserved as the tutelary deities of the king. The Ahoms invoked supernatural powers, formless spirits, Nats as they are called by Burmese, with rice, eggs, flowers, and sometimes animal sacrifices. The Ahoms slowly assimilated the local Hindu culture along with their traditional religious beliefs.

Hindu influence on Ahom rulers

The first apparent signs of Vedic Hindu influence were seen when Sudangpha was crowned King in 1397. There is an interesting story in this relation. When Tao-Kham-Thi (1380-1389) went on a military expedition, he authorized his elder wife to manage state affairs on his behalf.

Taking advantage of her position and authority she ordered the younger queen, with whom she wasn't on good terms, to be beheaded. The ministers, however, seeing she was pregnant, instead of killing set her adrift on the Brahmaputra on a raft.

She was rescued and given shelter by a Brahmin. There she delivered a male child who was later brought to the capital by nobles and placed on the throne after Tao-Khim-Thi's death without leaving behind any child. This young king, who assumed the name of Sudangpha brought and settled the Brahmin family in the capital. The Brahmin's sons were given important posts and the old Brahmin was appointed as his confidential adviser. It is said that under his influence many Hindu rites and ceremonies began to be observed.

Ahoms take to Vaishnavism

The twentieth Ahom monarch, Chao-Hpa Hso-Tam-La (1648-1663) who assumed the Hindu name of Jayadhvaj Singh, was the first in the dynasty to receive formal initiation (Saran) from a Vaisnava saint named Niranjan Bapu in 1654. Jayadhvaj Singh also made a grant of land and workers for the maintenance of Satra (Vaisnava monastery).

That was the beginning of the Hindu period of the Ahom rule and since then every Ahom king officially assumed a Hindu name in addition to his Tai-Ahom name on accession to the throne. The

coronation ceremony was also held according to both the Ahom and Hindu traditions.

Shaktism under Ahoms

Another turning point in the religious history of Assam and the Ahoms came at the beginning of the eighteenth century when the Ahom king Hso-Khrung-Hpa or Rudra Singh (1696-1714) settled a well-known Brahmin Sakta (Shakta) priest from Bengal named Krishnaram Bhattacharya at Kamakhya.

As he had his residence on that hill he was popularly called Parvatia Gosain. His son Sotanpha (Hso-Tan-Hpa) or Shiva Singh (1714-1744) became a zealous disciple of Parvatia Gosain and breaking royal custom, married a non-Ahom girl named Phuleswari. Under the influence of Sakta principles, Phuleswari was made Bar-Raja (king above king).

She attempted to bring about a transformation of the society by introducing Sakta principles and brought into practice the Hindu custom of cremating the dead among the Ahoms who used to bury them. She imposed Sakta principles on her subjects including Vaisnavas. The Parvatia Gosain also laid rules of procedure of worship of gods and goddesses in all the temples at Gauhati.

Ahoms face internal revolts

The reigns of later Ahom kings like Lakshmi Singh (1767-1780) and Gaurinath Singh (1780-1795) were rocked by internal rebellions that weakened the Ahoms so much so that it finally led to Burmese occupation (1817) after multiple invasions. Thus a glorious rule of 600 years of Ahom rule came to an unfortunate end with sectarian issues playing a huge role in their downfall.

In the subsequent part of this series, we shall take a look at the administrative machinery and military expeditions and strategies of the Ahoms.

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