

# The Constructive Contributions of Ahom to Assamese Society and Culture (A Brief Discussion)



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## Abstract

The Ahoms contributed widely and greatly for the organisation of the Assamese people enduring their society and cultures. The Ahoms lived in Assam from 13th to 19th century. They entered Assam crossing Patkai Mountain and then were able to build a harmonised culture among the Assamese people.

The ancestors of Ahoms were Tai race (tribe) and their original habitat was in China. First Ahom king Sukapha entered Assam with a few of his peers and established his kingdom at Saraideu. They ruled Assam for 600 years with so much of strength and made their (period) time a prestigious period in the political and cultural fields.

The writing of history is one of their greatest contributions. Besides writing historical texts, most of the sculptures and architectural buildings or monuments they built, declared their prestigious history. Music, paintings etc were also developed during Ahom period. The Ahoms were pious people. They gave Hindu religion a special place and in course of time converted themselves to this religion. They endeared the Assamese cultures and made some significant contribution to it. This paper will discuss about this in detail.

**Keywords:** Ahom, History, Assam, Culture and Society.

## Introduction

Inhabiting in the land of Assam from 13th to 19th century, the Ahoms were able to show themselves as a historically significant race. They entered Assam crossing the Mountain Patkai, endeared the grand Assamese cultures and traditions and tried to make it a larger meeting ground of various cultures. The Ahoms descended from Indra. They ruled Assam for almost 600 Years with greater force and made it the most important era in the history of Assam.

As historical facts reveal it, khenkam, the son of Indra, was the first king of Tai tribe. He had two warrior princes khunlung and khunlai. On the order of Indra both of them ruled many times over Mungrimuram, a place towards the North-East of Patkai Mountain. After khunlung, khunlai ruled Mungrimuram for 70 years. In course of time when his descendents became extinct, his son Mungrimuram ascended the throne. For his fight with his brother, Khunlung moved to North and established his own kingdom in china. From his time 40 kings ruled the place. In 1211 AD the famous Sukapha Prince invaded Namrup, Tipam Salguri, Habung, Simalaguri etc. and established his own kingdom. He ruled them for 18 years. In 1228 AD he arrived at the 'Soumar Area' of Kamrup crossing Patkai and Naga Mountain with his soldiers. At this time he established his kingdom completely. The ancestors of Ahom were of Tai Ethnic Group and ancient habitat was china. They were a branch of the Tai Ethnic Group.

## Objectives of the Study

The contributions of Ahom to the socio-cultural scenario of Assam were great and immense. After its establishment by Sukapha, it stretched from early thirteenth century to 600 years thereafter. A dynasty so wide but continuing its rule for so long is surely a historically important event. The Ahom were not only a strong dynasty, they were also able, clever, and successful rulers. Parallel to their successful political rule, their contributions were also immense to the culture of Assam. They took a significant role in composing histories. Therefore, it is very important to study the contributions of Ahom to Assamese culture and society. The study of the principles of their rule, their architecture and monuments, drawings, musical traditions, their life-philosophies will be really helpful for

the future generations and this will help in the development of Assamese culture and society. We should never forget the dynasty who built as uniform culture and their ideals should be the fountain of inspiration for us all.

#### **Geographical and Historical background about Assam**

Assam is a state in north eastern India, situated south of the eastern Himalayas along the Brahmaputra and Barak River valleys. Assam extending from 89°42' E to 96°00' E longitude and 24°08' N to 28°02' N latitude, It has an area of 78,438 sq.km. The state is bordered by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh to the north, Nagaland and Manipur to the east, Tripura, Mizoram to the south and Bangladesh, West Bengal to the west.

Assam was at the earliest called Kamrup. This Kamrup was divided into-Kampith, Ratnapith, Swarnapith and Soumarpith. The upper side of Assam, now was the Soumarpith in the past. In 1228 AD. Ahoms invaded this Soumarpith (pith=area). Assam came to known as 'Asom' from the time of arrival of the Ahoms. However, at first, according to the name of 'Ahom', 'Assam', 'Asam', 'Aham' were used to refer to the land of Assam. Today's Assam is the latest version of those words. According to linguists, in Ahom language 'Sam' denotes to 'defeat' or 'that cannot be defeated'. So, to use 'not' (a negative) Assamese letter 'Ō' (not, no) was added and it became 'not to be defeated' or 'Asom'. Some linguists say 'Ahom' (in Assamese) means 'not equal', so the meaning of Assam is the 'greatest' or 'the best'. Whatever is the case, it has gone through so many changes and alterations with the evolution of language and literature through the ages and now 'Assam' is commonly accepted as the name.

#### **Contributions of Ahoms in the Political Fields**

The Ahoms changed the life in the Brahmaputra valley with their 600 years of reign. Their political rule was the main feature towards creation of a national life. The Ahoms ruled their administration with so much ease and strength. Sukapha, Pratapsingha and Rudra Singha's administrative rule gave a glory to Ahom kingdom. For the smooth run of his kingdom, the first Ahom king, created two officers like 'Borgohai' and 'Buragohai' census was held in the days of Suhungmung who was also called 'Dihingia Raja'. It is to be mentioned here that the kings couldn't do anything according to their wish, any order or announcement, war or contracts were done on the suggestion of the three officials-Buragohain, Borgohain and Borpatragohain. Moreover various groups of people lived together with sympathy forming one race and marrying amongst each other as a consequence of the organisation of village, a system established Momai Tamuli Borbaruah in the days of Pratap Singha. The making the socio-economic field a stable one is related to Momai Tamuli Borbaruah. In 1608 AD, he determined the duties and legal activities of the Assamese officials and also the number of 'pike' (workers) who would work and under which officers. Under the Mansabdari System, Bora, Saikia, Hazarika, Boruah, Rajkhowa, Phukan etc. officials were created.

The steps taken by king Rudrasingha were also very praiseworthy in the creation of a greater Assam. He completed the census started by his father Gadadhar Singha and helped in organisation of the villages in a new fashion. King Rudrasingha constructed roads, footbridges, bridges for the development of the communication system.

As a part of their administration process, the Ahom kings also used cruel punishment for those who committed crimes. To subjugate new subjects, the practice of damaging sense organs, making scars on the body through hot iron rod and taking out of the kneecap were meted out. These cruel justice systems created fear in the minds of the people and they shirked back from committing any kind of crimes.

#### **Contribution of Ahom in socio-cultural Fields**

The initiation of writing history was started as soon as the Ahoms set foot on the land of Assam. The Tai or Ahoms had a special and rich language. The system of writing history was a special feature of their tribe. They, who established kingdoms in the thirteenth century, at first wrote history in their own Tai language. But they became bilingual within 200 years. From 16th century, they learned Assamese, parallel to their own language, through their marriage relations. They also started to write history in Assamese. The Ahoms loved history and considered reading and writing history as an integral part of education. The practice of history writing became so developed that there were some special royal officers employed to supervise the process or writing history by their own. The Ahom historians wrote not only histories of their own tribe and states but also of the Pre-Ahom ages and neighbouring states. Whenever the Ahom kings came into contact with the neighbouring or subordinated kings, they collected information as far as possible to write histories about those states. Jayantia History, Kachari History are example of some of them. The histories were written in the local languages or dialects. Political or moral education were tried to impart pointing out historical stories or legends. On the inspiration and individual co-operative efforts a number of histories were written down in the times of Ahom. Though the written histories were thousands in number, at present only 150 histories only are available. The damp climate, floods, earthquakes and various insects destroyed a number of books. The invasion of Mirjumla, the war and attacks of Maan Moran and the yogya of burning histories by Kirtichandra Barbaruah destroyed a lot historical texts.

The Assamese histories not tasteless packs of information but can be said to be a tasty fruit of literature. The histories were incomparable contribution to literature. The Ahoms transformed Assamese language into a language of their administration and wrote histories with it making huge contribution to Assamese language and literature.

The Ahoms were mainly of 'Tao' religion. Spread by Laosei, the main tenants of 'Tao' religion was 'Tao' and Tei-the eternal and the endless 'Purnabrahma'. The Ahoms accepted Somdeo as their ancestral god. Besides somdeo, Langkuri or Buragohai, Lengdan or Indra, Khaonam or Lakshmi

etc were also worshipped and belived by Ahoms worshipping were done through Deodhani priest who sacrificed animals.

While living in Assam, the Ahoms came into contact with the Chutias and started worshipping the 'kesaikhaiti deity'. An idea crept in their minds that if they couldn't keep 'Kesaikhaiti Deity' satisfied, they wouldn't be able to protect their kingdoms. The Ahoms were also naturally devoted to royalty. Though they believed in 'Tao' religion, they also patronised worshipping of Shiva practice of Sakta Religion and Vaisnab religion. They built Satras, temples, Namghar etc and paved the ways for practice of those religions. Also, they exempted the 'Gohain', 'Mahanta's and Vaisnab scholars from the royal works and taxes etc.

The marriage system of Ahom was 'Saklang'. According to it chants were sung before, Fra-Tra purnabrahma, as a witness. The chants in 'Tai' language pertaining to 'Saklang' system were similar to the sermons of Buddha while preaching. The Ahoms also had great respect for the womenfolk. The Ahom princesses were very beautiful, intelligent and chaste. Mulagavoru who went to take revenge upon her husband's enemy, the commander of Turbak, Chammakuwari who risked life for the safeguard of others are the brightest examples of them.

In the later ages when the Ahoms converted themselves to Hinduism they began to worship Hindu gods and goddesses. During the days of King Pratapsingha, Hinduism and influence of the Brahmins increased its status.

Durga Puja was celebrated in a grand manner making idols of Durga. Besides Durga Puja, 'Barsabha' was also a custom in the royal places. In this 'Sabha' Hari was worshipped. At this time, Auniati, Garmur, Daskhinpat and Kuraibahi Satras were given the status of the great Four Satras and were promoted to Royal Satras. The kings as well as their subjects began to accept the customs of 'Satra'. Religion, literature, drama flourished and developed on the influence of these 'Satras'.

The numerous sculptures of Ahoms reveal the status of the brightest history of Ahom tribe. Ranghar, Talatar ghar, Stone Bridge, 'Garh-ali, etc stand as the proof of Ahom architecture. The things used to build bridges, houses or buildings were collected from the local areas. Mustard oil, jogger, freshwater, shark fish, lime eggs of ducks, urad bean, 'Shawn', Bora rice, rice etc were mixed in definite quantity to make a sticky substance called Karaal (in Assamese). The works of Assamese stone cutters, miners, woodworkers were also praiseworthy. The Ahoms Maidams are also symbols of great Ahom sculptures. Ahom King Rudrasingha built Jaysagar tank to immortalise the memory of his mother, Jaymati. He also built Jaydol where there are pictures of his riding in horse and a statue of a woman assumed to be Jaymati in the walls towards the South. The architectural decorations and styles of Jaydol are of higher standard. Statue of God and goddess cut in stones, religions pictures, and pictures of the secular life, animals, trees, plants, fruits and leaves of trees are also there in the Jaydol.

The Ahom sculptures made from burnt soil are also incredible. The 'Moglai' and 'Nagar Soili' and Natigoshaidol, towards the west of Jaysagar made with. The 'Gaura Sample' also reveals the relations of Ahoms with the places outside India.

The painting and music also developed during Ahom reign. In the pre-vaisnab and vaisnab ages the tradition of music gained fame in the patronisation of the royalty. Rudrasingha patronised the local songs and music, so the Satras also gained popularity. Rudrasingha, through Susand Rai, translated 'Shrihastha Muktawali' into Assamese. The legends of Ravan badh, Rukmini haran, Padmawati haran and 'Akruragaman' etc were also presented as 'Bhaona' during the days of Rajeswar Singha, Kamleswar Singha and Gaurinath Singha respectively. In the days of Sivasingha also painting pertaining to 'Ushaharan', Gitgovinda, 'Anandlahari', 'Shankhasur Badh', Dharmapuran and Hasti-Bidyarnab were drawn on the patronisation of the royal families. The kings also invited artists from outside Assam. The things like aquilaria (Sasipat), a red pigment called 'Hengul-Haital', secretion of bael (golden apple) eggs of ducks, ferns and other plants and trees were used by the artists as colours of their paintings. The king created 'Gandhiya Bhorali' (an officer) to preserve the picture books of that time.

#### Conclusion

The Ahom period is the longest 600 years of rule. They were able to maintain a stable environment for that long period of time due to their virtues of sympathy and collective feelings. The Assamese people terrorised by the frequent attacks of Mughal were fueled to work together by the Ahoms. Their policy of no discrimination among races, respect of women and allowance of all kinds of foods show them their sympathetic side. The Ahom women could help in the smooth run of the administration by giving suggestions to the kings. The use of tarban, Pag-Jema (long and wide shirts and trousers) were in practice because of bringing of various kind of workers from Mughal states by Rudrasingha. Likewise, the seeds of plants and crops, paste, Ahom clothes, 'Ahom Mekhela' (a woman's dress), 'Nora-Sola' 'Jara' 'Ban' 'Maihang, and weapons were included in Assamese culture. The Ahom histories are also great treasure of Assamese literature. In these histories there are not only descriptions of the lives of the kings and their administrative policies and laws but also includes description of social, religious aspects. The histories provide due to development of Assamese prose literature. Overall, the Ahoms endeared the greater Assamese cultures and societies and tried to make a culture of amalgamations. The stories of Ahoms courage chivalry, heroism and glory remain written on the golden pages of history. The Ahoms identity as a courageous or undefeated race makes their period one of greatest period of Assamese history.

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