

Hinduism's Earliest Seeds Among The Ahoms In Medieval Assam: An Examination Of The Past

¹Bhanupriya Daimari, ²Dr. Francis Fernandez

¹PhD Scholar and Assistant Professor, ²PhD Supervisor and Professor

¹Department of Comparative Religion and Department of Political Science

¹Assam Don Bosco University and Tezpur College, Guwahati, India

ABSTRACT

The Ahoms of Assam are a branch of the great Tai race that have taken on local names throughout significant parts of Southeast Asia, including Burma, Thailand, Indo-China, and Yunnan, where they are referred to as Shan, Siamese, Lao, and Pai, respectively. According to historians, the Shan people, known as the Ahoms, originated in South-Western China approximately 2,000 years ago. They eventually made their way to the Brahmaputra valley, where they founded a kingdom and controlled Assam from 1228 to 1826 AD (Barpujari, 2007). They practiced their own religion and worshipped their own gods before departing from their ancestral location and travelling to the Brahmaputra valley. The Archaeologist claims that although they had practiced Buddhism prior to arriving in Assam, they began assimilating and adopting the customs and religion of the locals in the Brahmaputra Valley in order to facilitate the efficient operation of their administration. As a result, they adopted all branches of Hinduism without sacrificing the essential elements of their Tai religion (Barbaruah, 2013). This study attempted to identify the Ahom monarchs during whose reign the seeds of Hinduism in medieval Assam began to sprout. It also sought to identify the many Hindu sects that several Ahom rulers adhered to and how these groups Hinduized themselves later. Data are gathered for the study from primary and secondary sources, primarily from Buranjis and Chronicles that are readily available, and secondary sources such books and journals. The findings of the study indicate that during the reign of Sudangpha, also referred to as "Bamuni Konwar," Hinduism made its way into the Ahom court. Additionally, during

the reign of Suhungmung, the Hindu title "Swargya Narayan" was officially used for the first time, and during the reign of Pratap Singha, there was a noticeable increase in the influence of Brahmins. However, it was officially adopted by Ahom King Jayadvaj Singha. In addition to their own Tai religion, the successors of Ahom ruler Jayadvaj Singha later adopted various Hindu sects, including Saivism and Saktism.

Keywords: Hinduism, Medieval Assam, Tai, Ahoms, Religion, Vaishnavism, Saivism, Saktism

1. INTRODUCTION

Ahoms are one of the branches of Tai communities, adopted the name Ahoms once they arrived in the Brahmaputra valley. Their goal was to expand their territory, thus they began the process of assimilation with the local tribes and people. Prior to entering Assam under Sukapha, the Ahoms practiced a separate religion; nevertheless, later on, his descendants began to adopt other Hindu sects. As per Hiteswar Barbarua's assertion, the Archaeologists have determined that the Ahoms were Buddhists. However, in order to keep their administration running smoothly, they progressively gave up their Tai Ahom religion and adopted Hinduism (Barbarua, 2013).

Tai: The name "Tai" designates a sizable portion of Asia's Mongoloid population, which is primarily found in the Indo-Chinese peninsula. The current Tai habitat population may be found in the four main East Asian countries of Burma, Thailand, French Indo-China, and Yunnan, where they go by local names and are referred to as Shan, Siamese, Lao, and Pai, respectively. Locals in their area and throughout different historical periods have given them distinct names (Gogoi, 2016).

Ahoms: The Tai branch that governed the Brahmaputra valley for around six hundred years, from 1228 to 1826 AD, is referred to locally as "Ahoms." When the Ahoms first came to Assam, they practiced a different religion. However, as their territory grew, they began to blend in with the locals and eventually became Hindus. However, the subsequent immigrants continued to follow their own traditions and practices (Gogoi, 2016).

Hinduism: The three primary Hindu cults in medieval Assam were Saktism, Saivism, and Brahminism. In the past, the term "Brahminism" referred to a religion that involved vedic sacrifices and other Puranic rites that needed to be performed under the close supervision of a Brahmana priest. Saivism is a prominent Hindu sect that honours the god Siva. Saktism is a religion that honours a female goddess in all of her guises as the most charming divinity. (Barpujari, 2007).

Medieval Assam: Ancient Puranas describe the ancient state of Assam, which is located in northeastern India. This state is known as medieval Assam. H.K. Barpujari reckons with a date of 1205 AD. up until 1826 A.D. as the Assamese medieval era under Ahom dominion (Barpujari, 2007).

3. LITERATURE SURVEY

Baruah, Swarna Lata (1993), in Last Days of Ahom Monarchy: A History of Assam from 1769 to 1826, Lakshmi Singha's (1769–1780) reign marked the beginning of the Ahom

monarchy's demise. The first public challenge to the Ahom monarchy was launched by the Maomariyas, a branch of the Vaishnavas, in response to the oppressive Ahom dynasty.

Sarma Diganta Kumar (1996), the book *Religious Policy of the Ahom Rulers of Assam During 1228-1826* makes an effort to examine the religious practices of the Ahom rulers from the beginning of their rule till the end.

Dr. Birendra Kumar Gohain (1999), in *Origin of the Tai and Chao Lung Hsukapha*, attempts to study the origin of the Tai, the mythical origin of Hsukapha as illustrated in the Ahom Buranji and Pak Pey Kaka, two authentic sources of the origin of the Ahoms, the Ahom religion at the time of Hsukapha and the Tai Ahom language during the days of Hsukapha. Gohain (2011), in *The Ahoms and Their Tradition*, attempts to highlight the socio-political scenario of Kamrup prior to the advent of Chao-ling Siu-Ka-Pha, Hinduism and its influence on the Ahoms and how the Ahom Swargadeo and their nobles patronised Hinduism in a great way and how they became Hindus. He also highlights the efforts of the Ahom priestly class to retain their traditional religion, in spite of the stiff opposition from the royalty and the nobles. They opposed the deviation from the ancient system of burials and tried to guide the kings and the nobles in the religious practices; but they failed, to a large extent.

Phukan Sikha (2002). According to the book *Contribution of the Ahoms Towards Social and Cultural Integration of Assam*, the Ahoms introduced Saktism and Vaishnavism together with their literature, culture, and religion. The liberal mindset of the Ahom rulers allowed the people to enjoy religious freedom prior to the outbreak of the Maomariya Rebellion.

Hazarika Dhrubajyoti (2005). The origins of the general unhappiness in Assam during the Ahom era were determined. The Maomariya insurrection caused turmoil, and Ahom government was rejected as a result.

In **‘Continuity and Change among the Ahom,’ (2006)**, Nitul Kumar Gogoihas attempted to examine the processes of change which the Ahoms had to undergo to become what they are today. He has found that the Ahoms, in course of their long history, synthesised a new culture based on the process of old values to a remarkable degree and thereby maintained a dynamic equilibrium.

The above literatures highlight the Ahoms' tolerance for many religions and their progressive acceptance of Hinduism during their process of assimilation with various tribes for the purpose of expanding their territory.

4. THE OBJECTIVES

1. To ascertain which Ahom ruler or rulers' reigns the Hinduism seeds were sown in medieval Assam
2. To examine the various Hindu sects that Ahoms in medieval Assam adhered to.
3. To research the Hinduisation of Ahom kings in medieval Assam

5. RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH

One will be able to understand about the Ahoms' conversion to Hinduism in medieval Assam through the research on the suggested topic. The goal of this study is to characterise and analyse how the Hindu religion affected the Ahom kings, as well as when and how they began adhering to Hinduism rather than their own Tai faith. The fact that they adopted Hinduism after becoming a powerful Assamese dynasty is an intriguing subject to research. This research will add to our understanding of the Ahom people and how they embraced Hinduism in medieval Assam.

6. METHODOLOGY

Given the historical nature of the research issue, data analysis employs historical descriptive approach. Primary sources of the data were the Buranjis and Chronicles, which were written in both Assamese and Homo sapiens. Secondary sources included books, journals, and historical documents that were accessible.

The Ahoms' origin:

One of the Tai race's branches, the Ahoms, acquired the name "Ahoms" upon arriving in the Brahmaputra Valley. The name "Tai" refers to those families or communities from China's Yunnan region that are dispersed throughout North and East South East Asia. These people go by many names depending on where they live, such as "Shan" in Burma, "Thai" in Thailand, "Lao" in Laos, "Dai" and Zhuang" in China, and "Tay-Thai" in Vietnam. Regarding the original country of this Tais, there are many differing views and disagreements. Therefore, it can be inferred from many historical accounts and historians' perspectives that Central Asai was the Tai people's ancestral homeland. Regarding the Tais' ancestral homeland, different researchers have offered differing hypotheses. Lacouperie claims that

Regarding the religion of the Tai Ahoms, historians disagree. Some claim that the Ahoms are somewhat Buddhist and partially animist, and that they had their own ancestral gods and spirits that they worshipped. Sukapha was influenced by the Tai faith when he arrived in Assam. Padmeswar Gogoi asserts that the Ahoms did not practise image worship and that no names of gods or goddesses are contained in their sacred texts. Two beautifully preserved idols, Chum and Sheng, were the only possession of the Ahom royal family and acted as the king's tutelary deities. Chum and Sheng are referred to as Somdeo and Shengdeo in Assamese stories.

Ahom mythology states that Chum-deo and Sheng-deo were given to the elder princes Khun Long and Khun-Lai, respectively, to be worshipped daily, and that Lengdon sent Hkun-Lung and Hkun-Lai down from heaven to govern over a nation called Mong-ri-Mong-ram on earth. It is stated that Chumdeo and Shengdeo were transported down to the Brahmaputra valley by Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom dynasty. Certain chronicles state that Chumdeo and Shengdeo were handed to him by his grandmother when he left his native Yunnan, and other chronicles from Assamese claim that Sukapha took the two items from the Nara nation. It is evident from these records that Sukapha possessed Chomdeo and Shengdeo from his forefathers. Lengdon counselled Hkun Long and Khun Lai to stay put and fall upon these two gods. Lengdon was therefore the main deity worshipped by the Ahoms (Gogoi, 1976). From the chronicles it is seen that the Ahoms observed and performed various religious practices and ceremonies such as- Um-pha, Sai-pha, Me-Dam-Me-Phi, Phura-lung, Rik- Khan, Jashingpha puja, Tren Puja, Durga Puja, Barsabah etcetera.

Hinduism amidst the Ahom kings:

When Sukapha arrived in the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 AD, he encountered primarily Aryanized Hindu aboriginal tribes such the Kacharis, Barahis, Morans, and Koches. Since the Ahoms had a very small population, he began merging with the native tribes while taking into consideration their power relative to his own. Thus, by diplomatic strategies of religious and cultural assimilation and occasionally with compulsion to conquer them, Sukapha ultimately constructed their capital at Charaideo. To further enlarge their lands, his ancestors similarly used the same diplomatic strategies.

The absence of a suitable prince caused the Ahom realm to stay empty following the death of Tao Khamti, the monarch, in 1389. Following his ascent to the throne, Tyao Khamti dispatched an expedition against the Chutiyas to exact revenge for the deceitful assassination of his predecessor, King Sutupa. He left his elder queen in charge while his departure. Because of her sour relationship with the younger queen, she falsely ordered her to beheaded when the king was away. However, the ministers, who were aware of her pregnancy, did not execute her; instead, they let her drift in a raft down the Brahmaputra River. Following Tyao-Khamti's demise, the nobility failed to locate a suitable successor for the kingdom. Consequently, the royal authorities sought out the prince of King Tao Khamti's younger wife, escorting him to the royal palace from a Habung Brahman family and bestowing upon him the royal throne. The Brahman family of Habung joined the prince Sudangpha in the Ahom court. The family also placed a stone representing the god Bishnu, known as the Lakhshminarayan Salagram, for worship in the Ahom court. The ancient Brahman was appointed as the family's personal advisor. As a result, the Ahom court began to practise several Hindu ceremonies and rituals (Gait, 1926). Although it is unclear from the available records if Ahom King Sudangpha converted to Hinduism, it is certain that a Hindu idol made its way into the Ahom palace during Sudangpha's coronation (1398–1407 AD). Being raised

in a Habung Brahmin household, he was known by the Assamese Hindus as "Bamuni Konwar." According to Barpujari (2007), Sudangpha was the first Ahom king to introduce Brahminical elements into the Ahom royal court.

Following Sudangpha, Hinduism began to gain traction in the Ahom realm during the rule of Dihingia Raja Suhungmung (1497–1539). He established the Hindu calendar and was the first Ahom King to be given the title "Swargadeo." At that time, Shrimanta Sankardeva and Damodardeva emerged, but until Jayadhvaj Singha's reign, no Ahom King, Suhungmung, or anybody else adopted Hinduism. Susengpha alis Pratap Singha, the first Ahom ruler, was the first to actively embrace Saivism. Shiva worship was one of the most significant branches of Hinduism in Assam until the rise of the Neo-Vaishnava cult. The Shiva temple Nagasankara was constructed by Susengpha in the modern Biswanath, Assam, area. Sarbananda Rajkumar claims that it was intended to be the first Hindu temple built by the Ahom Kings. There were just a few instances that suggested the Ahoms and the Kacharis were already devoted to Shiva worship and animal sacrifice. During the reign of Suhungmung, also known as Dihingia Raja (1495–1541), a battle was fought. The parties involved agreed that the victor would be the one who could successfully chop off the neck of an animal in one stroke, which would then be offered to the god Mahadeva (Shiva) at Devagram (modern-day Dergaon). The Ahoms were successful in doing so. However, according to Barpujari (2007), the Ahoms had not yet embraced the Brahminical approach to Shiva worship. Ahom God Lengdon and Somdeo, as well as the Ahom capital, were moved from Sarguwa to Gorgaon by Suklangmung, also known as Gorgoya Raja (1539–1552). However, since Lakshmi-Narayan was already put in the Ahom court, the Ahom God was installed in a separate location with a designated official to take care of the God (Rajkumar, 2017).

The majority of people began adopting Shankardeva's faith during Pratap Singha's (1603–1641) rule, increasing the power of Brahmans; nevertheless, Pratap Singha's acceptance of Hinduism remains unproven (Rajkumar, 2017). Ahom monarchs began taking on Hindu names during his reign in addition to their Ahom name. Several ponds were excavated and dedicated to the Brahmans during his rule, and Siva Douls (Shiv temples) were built in Dergaon and Bishwanath. Thus, it can be seen that Pratap Singha became associated with the Hindu sect known as Saivism. He was the first Ahom king to give land as a charity to the Hindu Brahmans for the upkeep of temples, giving them Debottor and Brahmanottor. The Ahom monarchs began taking on a Hindu name with their Ahom name during his reign (Rajkumar, 2017).

Sutamla, also known as Jayadhvaj Singha (1648–1663) underwent initiation at Auniati Satra to become Swargadeo and openly adopt Hinduism for the first time. Since then, the Ahom kings have strived to further the Hindu religion by imitating Swargadeo Jayadhvaj Sinha (Barbarua, 2013). The first Ahom king to publicly adopt Hinduism—Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism—was Sutamala, also known as Jayadhvaj Singha (1648–1663), who underwent formal initiation under a Brahman priest named Niranjan Bapu. During his reign, Hinduism advanced significantly. He established the priest at Auniati Satra as the Satradhikar, the chief of the Vaishnava religious order. He instituted the Dakshinpat Satra and named Damodaradva's pupil Vanamali Gosain as the Satradhikar. The religious policies of the Ahom Kings were tolerant up until his reign.

During his reign (1669–1673), King Udayaditya gave orders to all of his ministers and officials to honour the "Boiragi" and take his "Saran." This caused unrest among the nobility and populace, who organised to remove him from the throne. When the Tungkhungia Dynasty first came into power, the religious policies of the Ahom court underwent a significant upheaval. Under Sutapha, also known as Godadhar Singha's (1681–1696) rule, religious tolerance gave way to religious persecution, i.e. persecution of Vaishnavas because he felt that the rising fame of the Vaishava Satras threatened their authority and morality. In the Ahom court, he established the Sakta cult and began assassinating the influential Mahantas and his followers. Having personal grievances against this elite, he was resolved to undermine the authority of these religious leaders after ascending to the throne. Gadadhar Singha had unpleasant experiences with religious leaders during Sulikpha's reign. These individuals insulted and mistreated him when he was a fugitive, and since his reign, there has been religious conflict between the populace and the King, which ultimately resulted in the Moamaria Rebellion (Baruah, 2004).

The son and heir of Gadadhar Singha, Rudra Singha (1696–1714), restored religious tolerance and reversed his father's policy of religious intolerance towards Vaishnava Gossains. The Buranji Vivek-ratna claims that Rudra Singha brought Vedic-style practices with him. In addition to being a follower of Hara and Gauri, he gifted property in the name of Umananda (Shiva Temple). There are additional mentions of Rudra Sinha giving the Brahmins a piece of land when the temple was being built. Barpujari (2007) said. He sent numerous Brahmana youngsters to study in Bengal and founded numerous schools for the Brahmins. Later in life, he made the decision to accept Hinduism and become an orthodox Hindu by undergoing a ritual known as "Sharan," during which he would learn mantras and secret texts. For this reason, he called on the well-known Sakta Mahanta Krishnaram

Bhattacharya to study under him and become his pupil. Although he was reluctant to follow the called Mahanta, he appeased the Mahanta by giving the order for his two sons and the Brahmana followers to recognise him as their Guru. (Gait, 1916).

Hinduism reached its pinnacle during the reign of Siva Singha, also known as Sutangpha (1714–1744), who succeeded to the throne following the death of his father Rudra Singha. Submitting to Rudra Singha's orders, he took initiation from Krishnanarayan Bhattacharya, who would later become Parbatiya Gossain, and placed him in charge of the Sakta Hindu centre, Kamakhya Temple, located atop Nilachal Hill. Because Brahman Priests had complete control over Siva Singha, he built many temples and gave land to sustain the Brahmins. A fearful that his reign would soon come to an end, he gave his queen Phuleswari charge of his administration and proclaimed her as "Bar Raja," or Chief King. As a devout follower of Goddess Durga, she was a Sakta Hindu and went by the name Pramatesvari, which is one of Durga's names. When Bar Raja Phuleswari learned that Vaishnava Mahantas refused to worship Durga, she gave the Maomariya and other Mahantas the command to forcibly bring under the Sakta temple. Bar Raja's deed subsequently precipitated the Maomaria Rebellion, an open revolt between Saktism and Vaishnavism (Gait, 1926).

There was also evidence of Hindu influence in the Ahom court during Rajeswar Singha's (1751–1769) rule. As a devout Hindu, he travelled to Gauhati to pray at different temples. He also took the effort to build numerous temples and provide land to the Brahmins (Gait, 1926).

Due to Gadadhar Singha's religious intolerance, there was a religious war between the people and the King that began during his reign and culminated in the first Maomaria Rebellion (1769–1780) under Lakshmi Singha. Since Lakshmi Singha was already fifty-five years old, he gave the supervision of his administration to an official named Kirti Chandra Bar Barua. Kirti Chandra Bar Barua had a tremendous deal of disaffection towards the Vaishnava Mahantas during Lakshmi Singha's rule. The Maomaria Rebellion against Ahom King began under his reign, but it was quickly put down and Ahom Kingdom was reinstated (Gait, 1926).

The next Ahom king was crowned Gaurinath Sinha, also known as Suhitpangpha (1780–1795), following the demise of Lakshmi Singh, who persisted in religious persecution of the Hindu Vaishnava cult. The second and third Maomaria uprisings occurred during his rule; as a result, Gaurinath Sinha needed outside help to put an end to the Maomarias (Barua, 2004). As a result of the struggle between the Sakta and Vaishnava schools of Hinduism, which sparked the Maomaria insurrection, the Burmese invaded Assam, and the Ahom kingdom's authority was weakened.

7. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The aforementioned analysis makes clear that the installation of the Hindu god and the performance of Hindu rituals were introduced into the Ahom court for the first time in the fourteenth century, during Sudangpha's (1398–1403) reign, also known as Bamuni Konwar. Subsequently, the process of Hinduisation was carried out in various forms. The arrival of Sudangpha on the Ahom throne and the introduction of the Brahminic worship of Hinduism

during his reign demonstrate the influence of Hinduism in the Ahom palace. Hinduism also made inroads into the Ahom realm when King Suhungmung began officially adopting the Hindu title "Swarga Narayan," a title that his heirs have continued to bear ever since. It is thus possible to conclude that while Hinduism was sown during the reign of Sudangpha (1398–1407 AD), also known as "Bamuni Konwar," it was not able to sprout until the reign of Dihingia Raja, also known as Suhungmung.

According to the study, Ahom Kings began adopting Hindu names during the reign of Pratap Singha. Jayadhyaj Singha was the first Ahom King to formally adopt Hinduism by undergoing initiation prior to Nirranjan Dev in Auniati Satra. Thus, under Jayadhvaj Singha's rule, the Hindu religion was first formally accepted in the Ahom empire. According to the study, the Ahom monarchs embraced many Hindu sects, including Vaishnavism, Saivism, and Saktism. Initially, the Ahom kings were influenced by Vaishnavism. Later, however, it is evident from their works and deeds that Saivism also had an impact on them since they adopted Shiva worship, and during the reign of Siva Singha and his wife "Bara Raja" Phuleswari, Saktism emerged as the dominant cult.

The analysis indicates that the Ahom kingdom began to become more Hindu after Sudangpha, but this process of adopting Hinduism peaked under Siva Singha's rule (1714–1744). His wife Phuleswari, often known as "Bar Raja," was a devout Sakta whose harsh religious laws against the Vaishnavas incited animosity among the Vaishnava Mahantas and eventually sparked the first Maomaria Rebellion during Lakshmi Singha's reign (1769–1780 AD). During Gaurinath Singha's (1780–1795) reign, the Second and Third Maomaria Rebellions sprang out. These were put down by the King of Ahom with outside assistance,

and the Burmese invasion of Assam followed. The Ahom rulers' liberal religious policies, which were evident in the Hinduisation of medieval Assam, allowed them to build and grow their kingdom. Ultimately, they ruled over Assam from 1228 to 1826 AD.

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