

## Society in Medieval Assam

The social life of the Ahom kingdom was very simple and liberal, which was an important cause responsible for long six hundred years rule. At the time of the advent of Ahoms, the people of the Brahmaputra Valley were composed of two broad divisions i.e the Hindus and the non-Hindu ethnic groups. The Hindus consists of Brahmanas, caste- Hindus and the Hinduised royal families and converts. In that section the non-Brahmins called Sudras or Sudirs were also included. The non-Hindu tribes who lived in their respective places was the second group.

The Ahoms became the ruling class in the valley from 13<sup>th</sup> century. Originally a group of Tai-Shan, known as Ahom had seven principal clans or phaidis called satgharia Ahoms. They formed the Ahom aristocracy. The family of the king, Burahgohain and Borgohain families formed the royal family. In later period the Barpatra Gohain family was also included in that group. The remaining four were Deodhai, Mohan, Bailung and Siring. They were priestly class of the Ahom. The Satgharia Ahoms were a group of exogamous families, each of which was divided into number of sub-groups. These royal and noble families occupied the higher position in the society.

The Brahmanas enjoyed their privilege as priestly class. They maintained the school of Sanskrit learning and the tools. In Ahom administration the Kayasthas acted as accountants, the Ganakas were astrologer, the kalitas monopolized the trade and other professions in the state. Keots were usually cultivator class. The Kaivartas depended on fishing and cultivation. Snake charming, silk rearing was the profession of Nath-Yogi community.

Till the emergence of the neo-vaisnavite movement the non Hindu tribes of the valley enjoyed their own socio-cultural practices. However, with the expansion of the neo-vaisnavism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the whole population of the valley more or less came under the pale of Hinduism.

There were some professional communities too in the state. They are Bantias (traders), Tantis (weavers), Hiras (Potters) Sonowal (gold washer) Telis (oil man), haris (scavengers) etc.

In later period several group of people of different culture had entered the valley. The Manipuris, the Sikhs, the Muslims also entered in later periods. The Khamtis, Aitonias, Phakials, Turung, who were Buddhist by religion, were also come to the valley in 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## Social Divisions

In the social hierarchy the king at centre, the tributary Rajas, the Patra Mantris, the frontier or local governors and the priestly class was at the top. The sons of the reigning king were established as governors of certain areas with the title Raja. The chamua class enjoyed privileges as per their skill. The officers like Phukan, Barua, Barbarua, Rajkhowa etc. were also belong to the aristocratic class.

The vast majority of the population consisted of the Paiks, who were in reality the laboring class. They work as cultivator at the time of peace and in the time of war acted as soldier.

Slavery was widely prevalent in the kingdom. Slave could be bought and sold in open market. The difference between the paik and slaves was only one of degree and not of kind. The bahotya paik class was more miserable than a slave.

There was rigid distinction among the people belonging to different classes. This was earlier not the Ahom custom. But later on they acquired it from Bhuyans and Chutiyas. Gradually this practice of social distinction developed in all cases. In terms of Dress, use of Dola (palanquin) wearing of leather shoes etc. The superiority of the great Gohains was always maintained.

In similar way, the distinction between the king, nobility and the small section of the gentry holding high official and the mass strictly maintained. None but the king could build a house of brick and mortar with both end rounded. The house of a noble was one end rounded and the houses of the masses were small in size.

The full dress of a noble in general consisted of a Churia, a jacket-like half coat, a turban and a chador folded over the right shoulder. The masses used only churia and gamucha. Cheleng cloth was also wrapped round his body. The garments of the nobles were made of silks like pat and muga.

The womenfolk of the nobility wore three piece garments, a sewn called mekhela, riha and chador all nicely embroidered. The common womenfolk wore only mekhela and Chaddor.

In kamarupa the social distinction was stricter than upper Assam. The common people were exploited there under pargana system. In kamrupa Ahom head quarter the local people were not allowed to enter. Even the merchants and local officers were also not allowed to enter without permission.

There were caste distinctions among the Hindu population, although it was not a social norm of the kingdom. The Brahmins of lower Assam considered themselves as more purer than the other castes. So, no intermarriage among them took place.