

Religion and Indigenous Beliefs in the society during Ahom/ Medieval Assam

Assam is one of the multi-religious states of India. Since the ancient days people of Assam have been following different types of religions. Hinduism has been the religion of the large majority of Assamese people since long past. The cults of Saivism, Shaktism and vaisnavism are more prominent in the state population. Beginning with the 13th century till the close of the 17th century the Turko-Afghans and the Mughals repeatedly invaded Assam for which the Muslims formed a distinct minority in the populace of the state. In addition to Hindu-Muslims, Buddhism- Jainism the animistic faiths among the tribes were also prevalent in Assam.

Before embracing Brahminism or Hinduism, the Tai-Ahom community worshipped a number of God and Goddesses with sacrifices and offerings. The main of them were Phuratara (Creator) Lengdon (God of heaven), Jashingpha (Goddesses of Learning) Phai (God of Fire), Kao-Kham (God of water). The Guardian God of the community was the image of Chom Cheng later called Somdeo (Aryan style) After Hinduisation also they continued to worship the image for their success and wellbeing. They had their own priest named Deodhai. But gradually he was overshadowed by the Brahmin priest. Braminsm or Hinduism entered in the Ahom society during Sudangpaha and Jayadhavj Singha became the first Ahom king to embrace the Hindu religion formally. His successor upto Lora Raja accepted vaisnavism as their creed. But Gadadhar Singha became Shakti worshipper. The Satras played important role in the socio-political life of the society. Thus the Ahom, more or less followed a liberal policy towards all the creeds. Most of the Ahom monarch showed due respect to all religious heads and institutions. The Muslims priest also entertained in the court and allowed to pray for their welfare at Poa Mocca in Hajo. Lands were granted to Satras, Muslims shrine and temples.

The Ahom did not interfere in the social life and adopted a liberal policy towards diverse ethnic and religious groups in the kingdom. In later period the Moamorya uprising took place due to socio-political causes, which paved the way of the end of Ahom rule in the valley.

Saivism: Saivism refers to worship of lord Siva who is one of them principal three Hindu Gods called Brahma, Bishnu, Mahesh. Siva was worshipped in Linga form. Sibadol of Sibsagar, Umananda temple, Sukreswar temple etc were the places of worship of Saiva, constructed during Ahom rule. It is believed that Lord Siva was the aryanised form of Sri Barai or Bathou Barai of kacharies.

Saktism: Skatism is the cult of worshipping goddess Durgadevi, who symbolizes power. Since prehistoric time Goddess Kamakhya (kamlakhi of Dimacha-kacharis) had been worshipped in Assam. Kamakhya temple of Nilachal hill, Tamreswari Mandir of sadya, Malinithan of Arunachal had been the main places of Sakti worshipping.

Neo Vaisnavism: The most dominant cult of Assam during Ahom period was neo-vaisnavism introduced by Saint Srimanta Shankaradeva. A large majority people followed neo-vaisnavism as their religion. The introduction of neo-vaisnavism brought sea change in the socio-

cultural system of Assamese populace. The Ahom monarch patronized the Satras of Assam, located in different places. Many ethnic people had converted themselves into neo-vaisnavism due to the influence of great personality-Sankaradeva. Some of them completely given up their traditional belief system and some till then, maintained their own system of faith along with neo-vaisnavism.