

## Natural Resources and Ahom Religion

**Himadri Gogoi,**

Ph.D Research scholar, Department of History, Assam University Diphu Campus

### **ABSTRACT:**

In Asia Assam was the first site which was drilled for oil. Assam is a home of various faunal and floral species from the very primitive period. Ahoms were the one who first divide the lands based on their quality of soil. The first organised land settlement was done by Rudra Singha. Before the British, Ahoms were the first who maintained the sustainability of the natural resources in Assam. They used various resources in their religious rituals and for other purposes. But they were also aware to conserve these resources. Based on the significance of the plants or herbs in various places these were extensively planted. In fact, they also worshipped trees, sacrificed birds and animals in their religious rituals. So undoubtedly Ahoms were the animists. Assam's silk, *muga* and *eri* clothes have great demand during that time and it is still same. Besides all these they also used various birds and animals for their entertainment. Though the Ahoms could not conduct the proper management of natural resources but they valued the resources.

**Keywords:** Land settlement, natural resources, trees, animistic, rituals, religion, sustainable.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The Tai-Ahoms played an active role in order create unity among all the communities of Assam. They contributed various social, political, economic, religious traditions, beliefs and customs after their settlement in Assam. But at the same time, in order to put strong political hold in Assam they also embraced local traditions and customs. Afterwards as a result of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement led by Sankaradeva, new religious rituals became popular. At present, there are still few priest classes who are engaged in religious rituals like-Deodhais, Mohans and Bailung. Regarding the religion of the Ahoms, there are debates among different historians. Basically the religion of the Ahoms was based on Tai origin. But before their entry in Assam they also adopted Buddhism. But in the course of time, we can observe the influence of Hinduism in their religion. There were various religious rituals where they extensively used natural resources. Prior to the British rule in Assam, these Ahoms were the one who maintained the existence of natural resources in various ways. Hence, they also had various social beliefs in the trees and it greatly effected in the daily lives of the people of Assam.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

- i) To study about the availability of natural resources in Ahom period.
- ii) To explore the use of natural resources in religious ceremonies.
- iii) To look into the impact of natural resources in Ahom religion.

iv) To study about the various rituals of Ahom Kingdom.

## METHODOLOGY:

The present study involves the qualitative and analytical method of research on the basis of both primary and secondary sources. The primary data is collected from *Buranjis*, *Charit Puthi*, religious text etc. Secondary sources contain published books, journal articles, magazine collected from various libraries. Various e resources are also used for this research paper.

There are various groups of people who are totally depended on nature. These groups have a close relationship with the natural resources. Likewise, the Tai Ahom people were also depended on nature and its resources. They used natural resources in various field like- religion, food, social beliefs, medicine, daily use, for construction of houses and in house gardens. In religious ceremonies plants and trees like- *bargas* (*Ficus Benghalensis*), *ahat gas* (*Ficus religiosa*), *singkara* or *block singpha* or *kam-pha*, mango, *uriyam*, *dron* (*Leocus aspera*), munia grass (*Cynbdon dactylon*), guava (*psidium guajava*) were very essential. *Bar gas*, *ahat gas* (*Ficus religiosa*) etc. are the religious plants of the Tai Ahoms. *Ahat gas* is called as Bodhi tree and the Tai Buddhists of Assam-Arunachal called it as *puthi –kham*. In the religious ceremonies of the Ahoms *block singpha* was used. Therefore, people used to plant this tree in their respective residents. *Khamti Phakes* also planted Mok-pha. (*block singpha*) and they used it as medicine. In the Ahom marriage system i.e. *Chaklang*, mango leaf, betel leaf and *ahat* leaves were used and still we can observe its use. These were not only used in marriage, but also in other ceremonies. *Tonglotis* or *satful* were used in *Umpha*, *Subasani* (a goddess) puja and in *chaklang*. After the adoption of Hinduism by the Ahoms, besides planting *block singpha*, black tulsis (holy basil) were also planted in each individual's place. Even some people also planted *tongloti* or *satful* in their gardens. Even some of the Tai people ate some of the herbs or medicinal plants without cooking. These were like- mint, *manimuni*, onion leaf, *kalmuni*, black holy basil etc. They used these as food items. Besides all these, banana leaf occupied a distinct position like today. During the bihu festival, a plant named *barhamthuri's* (*talauma hodg soni*) leaves were used by the females as lipstick. On the other hand, the skin of *acquilaria agallocha* or *sanchi paat* was used as papers. But, later Ahoms stopped using it as paper and they started to produce *agar* or perfume. In order to protect their gardens from the snakes, they planted a tree called *euphorbia nivulia*. As soap or medicine they used *sapindous mukrossi* or *monisal*. Moreover in their gardens, they planted *kan-jalakia* (*capsicum minimum*), *mi fit*, *noi*, *mak noa* (*boerhaavia diffusa*), *narabagari* (*prunus domestica*), *mak man*, *Ahom bagari* (*prunus persica*), *amlakhi* (*phyllanthus emblica*) were planted. We can observe the use of similar plants among the Chinese and the Tai people of Thailand. These Tai Ahoms developed some areas as conserved forests. These forests were for public purpose and they claimed these as holy. They believed that it is the place of a deity. He was called as 'Khi thoun' in Tai language. Sometimes religious ceremonies were organized here for the growth of the forests. No one was allowed to uproot any tree or plant from these forests. The Deodhai, Mohon and Bailong communities of Ahom supervised the religious ceremony of the forest deity. These communities still use to practise religious ceremonies. So we have observed that the Tai Ahoms were totally depended in forests. They used flowers a lot in all the religious rituals extensively. For them, lotus was the holy flower and thus they did lotus gardening in Ahom Empire. A flower plant called

*Kesia siamia* was planted individually. It also produces firewood. Now a day, the forest department of Assam also started to plant this.<sup>1</sup>

The Ahom religion was based on religious rituals and ancestor worship. Two rituals of Ahom religion were – i) sacrificial sect (*Ba- Phi*). ii) Non-sacrificial sect. Deities were worshipped on the basis of their traditional culture. *Sristi sakti puja* was the sacrifice of the domestic animals. The non-sacrificial were those who did not do sacrifice for the worship of god and goddesses. In *Umpha* and *Saipha* ceremonies and *Subasani* (a goddess) worship, white duck, *wallago attu* (a type of fish, *borali maas*), boil rice etc. were offered. The Ahoms eat *Amroli-tup* (a species of reddish brown ant). It is cooked with duck egg and pork. They drink *Luk-lao* or rice beer. These are eaten as traditional ritual.

On the other hand, non-sacrificial sect offered mainly tree or organic food. These were offered in the name of deities. It is to be noted that both of the rituals have been practised by the Ahom period from the very beginning. Though religion divided the people into various sects, we can't assure that the Tai Ahoms were involved in both of these rituals. But besides all these facts, it is important to summarise here that in all the rituals of Ahoms, flowers, leaves, parts of tree were extensively used.

The study on Ahom religion is based on the available sources of the Ahom period. On the basis of these sources we cannot come into definite conclusion that the Ahoms had solely one religion. By observing their religious thought it can be said that the Ahoms were partly Hinayana Buddhists, partly Tantrik Buddhists and partly Animist and Spirits. In fact Ahom religion is influenced by Tao religion. But before entering Assam, the Ahoms adopted Buddhism. We can observe that Ahoms extensively used natural resources in various religious rituals. Depending on some religious works, Hiteswar Barbarua also accepted that the Ahoms adopted Buddhism. According to P. Gogoi, Ahom religion was based on supernatural power, it is like the formless spirits or *nats* prayed with rice, eggs, flowers and sometimes animal sacrifices were also done. But they did not do image worship. So B. J Terwiel opined on the basis of available evidence that the Ahoms did not follow a particular religion solely but it can be called as the early version of old Tai religion. Some of the important religious ceremonies of the Ahoms were- *Umpha*, *Saipha*, *Rikkhawn*, *Me-dam-Me-Phi* etc. The main god of the Ahom religion is *Somdeo* or *Chumpha*. Ahoms worshipped god through prayers like- *Chao-phra*, *Chao-Tra*, *Chao-Nu-Ru*, *Chao-Kao-oi* with head towards the sky but not bowing down before the deity. From *buranjis* we can say that the *Chumpha* ceremony is completely based on imagination. It has the similarity with the religions of South-East-Asian countries. The most significant quality of the Ahoms was their assimilative nature. It helped to create socio-political impact in the Assamese society. Regarding culture and religion the Ahoms tried to identify themselves with the local people of Assam. They were influenced by the local animistic tribes of Assam like- Kacharies, Barahis, Morans etc. The similar animistic beliefs created a common social platform for both. The *Umpha*, *Saipha* and *Me-Dam-Me-Phi* religious ceremonies were held annually by sacrificing animals. It resulted in a process of socialisation in between Ahoms and the indigenous tribes of Assam. Besides their assimilation of different cultures, they did not completely stop to follow Tai practices. Their religious culture was based on *mong*. The *Phi –mong*

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<sup>1</sup> Pushpa Gogoi, Udvit jagat and Tai jiwana, Tai Sanskriti, P-urbanchal Tai sahitya sabha, Dhemaji, PP: 249-251

was the protecting spirit of Ahom Religion. It included forests, water, domestic animals and games on land and water. That is why Ahom worshipped a number of gods. The major deity of the Ahoms is *Lengdon*. For the first two hundred years, the Ahoms followed only their religious doctrines including sacrifices. Gradually, the socio-political condition of Assam encouraged them to follow Hinduism. At the very outset of the Ahoms in Assam, Sukapha and his associates claimed Assam as *Myungdun Chun Kham*. It meant the garden of yellow crops. After their entry in Assam, they started to love *nam-ti-lau* (Brahmaputra or *Bar Luit*) and other *khe* (river) and also the fertile lands of Brahmaputra valley. Hereditarily, the Tai Ahoms could recognise the trees and plants and as a result of this, they started to plant trees in Assam along with cultivation. Thus, Assam became more colourful after the advent of the Ahoms. Plantation of tree was the characteristic of their non-sacrificial ritual. For various reasons like, religious rituals, beautification, health-and hygiene, for the sustainable development of the environment, the Tai-Ahom cultivators started to plant many trees in proper places.

Under the reign of Sudangpha or Bamuni Konwar, for the first time, the Ahoms accepted the Brahmanical cult. He grew up in a Brahmin family. The practice of coronation ceremony in *Singarighar* was introduced for the first time by him. He wore a headgear made of the feathers of *deo-kukura* (a wild cock). Like him, other Kings like- Suhungmung Dihingia Raja, Sushengpha or Pratap Singha, Sutamla or Jaydhvaj Singha and finally under Sukhrungpha or Rudra Singha, Ahom Empire transformed into a Hindu state. As we all know that the Ahoms produced surplus production by adopting the technique of wet-rice cultivation, but their religious and cultural base was depended on egalitarian. The process of Hinduisation helped its development. On the other hand, the Ahoms also equally believed in Sakta or Vaisnava, Brahmana or non-Brahmin. But not a single religion developed as a state religion. During this time, under Sankardeva, Neo-Vasnavite movement began. This influenced the establishment of various *satras* in Assam. These were set up under royal patronage as well as under popular support. Even in *satras* various herbs and medicinal plants and orchards were developed.

### **SOME OF THE IMPORTANT RITUALS OF THE AHOMS:**

The Tai- Ahoms practised various religious ceremonies. Some were publicly celebrated and some were celebrated within the family. These were purely based on agriculture. The primary ritual was the ancestor worshipping ritual i.e. *Na Dam* (na- new, dam-dead) in Tai language. Another ritual is *Phang Chi Mung*. It was practised during the failure of crops, epidemic or bad weather. For the protection of disease another ceremony called Chora Utuwa Aai Sabah (Chora- boat, *utuwa*-floating and Aai means mother). It was practiced in monsoon season. In some of these ceremonies hens are sacrificed. It is very important to note that the Ahoms did not have separate prayer halls. In the eastern corner of the kitchen, the *deodhais* and *Bailungs* used to place their position. They use to do the rituals of *Me-dam-me-phi*. It is an important religious ritual where hens were sacrificed and it is still prevailed. Subasani puja is also an important religious ceremony. According to some of the scholars it was like Durga puja. Three priests used to perform the ritual. For this ritual birds and animals were sacrificed. Another important ritual is *Kin-on-Meu* or *Na-Khuwa*. In this, the first seasonal fruits, crops yielded by the people were offered to the dead and after that prayed to the ancestors for the proper growth of the crops. It is still practised among some of the Assamese community. Another rare ritual is *Rik- khan-Mung-Khan* (*Rik*-call, *khan*- longevity or 'Agus tola'. It

was practised for health and diseases. According to the practice elderly women in the village used to lead the village in a procession. They used to go to a nearby water source and after appeasing the water god *Khaokhom*. water was given to sick people for recovery. A distinct marriage ritual of the Ahoms is *Chaklang*. It has been observed that these days the ceremony of Rikkhav and Deo are not performed. According to Padmeswar Gogoi, this ritual is a mixture of ancient Tai-Ahom, Buddhist and Hindu religion. The ceremonies of *Rik-khvan*, *Deoban*, *Ap-tang* are related to buranji. The lotus circle with one hundred and one lights is similar with the Buddhist tradition. Another ritual was *maidam-dia*. In this ritual the dead body is buried in a wooden box made of *uriyam*. It is still practised by some of the people of upper-Assam. At present, Ahoms perform their religious festivals based on Hindu tradition. The earlier peepal leaf and block singpha was replaced by tulsi, mango or basil leaves. The *phuralung* ritual of the Ahoms was mixed with Hindu *Barsabah* and it was called as *Subasani sabha*. Now a day, these rituals became very simple. According to the Tai-Ahom scholars it is only because of the scarcity of resources and it needs huge expenditure. Moreover there is a scarcity of skilled person. Presently, there are several organizations who are examining the various customs and traditions of the Ahoms for popularising among the common people. <sup>2</sup>

### **HOLY TREES OF THE AHOMS:**

#### **Bar-gas** (a banyan tree, *ficus benghalensis*) or **Tun-rung-rai:**

Among the trees planted in Ahom Empire, *bar-gas* or *tun-rung-rai* was the holy tree. The Ahoms buried people under this tree. They believed the plantation of this tree is a holy work. They also believed that planting of this tree would increase the life span of the planter. They offered copper coins while planting the seedling of *bar-gas*. It meant that the money was given to earth for buying the land for plantation. Religious institutions were established under *bar-gas*. For e.g. while Siukapha established a religious institution at Tipam, he built it under a *bar-gas* or *tun-rung-rai*. We can still observe its sign. It is to be noted that before the establishment of *namghar*, all the religious institutions were set up under this tree only. In fact while crossing the *bar-gas* Tai Ahom people used to pray. They also believed that if a deaf person would eat food on the leaf of this tree, he can become normal. Even folk songs were also composed on this tree. In this way the Ahom youths established the foundation of bihu dance under this tree. It thus resulted into various places like-Dhupabar, Bihubar, Titabar, Laharibar, Hatbar and Kaliabar etc.

#### **Ahat gas** (*ficus religiosa*) or **Khang-rung-rai:**

Like *bar-gas*, *ahat-gas* also became popular as holy tree in the Ahom Empire. Basically, from the very early period, Mongoloid people had lived in Bhubar to Dayang area where there were availability of both *ahat-gas* and *bar-gas*. For this they extensively used these trees for various purposes. On the other hand, religious jurisdiction was given to the criminals by recognising *ahat-gas* as witness.

#### **Makhimora** (*Flemingia satrobilifera*) or **Tun-Meleng:**

Another important tree of the Ahoms is Makhimora or Tun-Meleng. This was planted in Meleng area of Jorhat. In Meleng this tree got royal patronage in the Ahom Empire. It was only because, in the

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<sup>2</sup> Minakshi Borah, Festivals and rituals of Tai-Ahoms of Assam, NEZINE.com, 21.09.2016.

nearby area of Meleng, dairy-farming was developed by the people of the Ahom Empire. This tree was basically used in garu-bihu and still the people of Assam use meleng in garu-bihu to shower their cows. The Ahoms believed that, by keeping a twig of meleng tree in dairy herd can cure the diseases of cows.

**Bagari** (jube; *Zizyphus mauritiana*) or **Mak-thum**:

The Ahoms believed that by planting *bagari* tree in house garden can protect people from diseases. On the day of garu-bihu, *tikani barua*, black berry branches were hanged on doors for protecting the house from spirits. On the other hand, while returning home, after burying the dead, people used to keep a twig of *bagari* tree in hand.

**Uriyam** (West Indian cedar, *Bischofia javanica*):

Another important tree of the Ahoms was *Uriyam*. This tree was available in the forests of Assam. It was also believed as a holy tree. This tree was used to manufacture boxes called *rang*. This was used while burying the dead in *maidams*.<sup>3</sup>

**CONCLUSION:**

From the above discussion it is clear that the Ahoms used natural resources in religious rituals to a great extent. Among the religious rituals, Na Dam, *Na-khuwa*, *Subasani*, *Me-Dam-Me-Phi*, *Chora utuwa nao sabah*, *Rik –khan-Mung-Khan*, *Chaklang* are very important. In every ritual various resources were used. Not only this. Animals and birds were also sacrificed in some of the resources. Regarding the practising of these rituals there were experienced priest classes like Deodhai, Mohan, Bailung etc. These classes are still practising the rituals. They sacrificed birds in some of the rituals. Though the Ahom rulers extensively used the availability of the resources never decreased, because they appointed various groups of people to maintain the existence of the natural resources. As a result of which the British people were able to impose forest policies in Assam in order to conserve the natural resources. One of the most striking features of the Ahom administration was the *paik* system. The *paik* system was the main basis of the administration of the Ahom Empire. These efficient *paiks* under the guidance of the important ministers had performed all the duties in various fields. Another important fact regarding the Ahom rulers was that they did not interfere in the lives of the people of Assam. That is why these people also helped the rulers in various ways. The Ahom rulers examined the various species of the flora and accordingly they planted it in different places. On the other hand, they were the animists who worshipped trees. There were various trees like *Ahat gas* (*ficus religiosa*) or *Khang-rung-rai*, *Makhimora* (*Flemingia strobilifera*) or *Tun-Meleng Uriyam* (West Indian cedar, *Bischofia javanica*, *Bar-gas* (a banyan tree, *ficus benghalensis*) or *Tun-rung-rai* etc. These trees were the holy trees in the Ahom Empire. To sum, we can say that though the Ahoms were unaware about the proper conservation of the natural resources, they maintained the sustainability of these resources and used in proper ways in some cases. They accepted these as royal property and thus they valued its existence. At present we can observe that these rituals are practised in a very simple way without using so much of natural resources. It is only because of the lack of resources and the lack of experienced person who have proper idea to practise these rituals. But

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<sup>3</sup> Hem Buragohain, Tai Ahomar pach jupa Dharmya brikhha, Tai sanskriti, Purbanchal Tai sahitya sabha, Dhemaji, 1994, PP: 252-255

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besides all these Me-Dam-Me-Phi, the ancestral worship ceremony is getting prominence in Assam. It can be also called as a ceremony of unity.

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