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Review Article

Religious Policy of the Ahom Rulers of Assam

Dr. Pranjal Bhuyan *

Associate Professor, Dept. of History, Tengakhat College, Dibrugarh, Assam, India

Corresponding Author: *Dr. Pranjal Bhuyan

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Abstract

The Ahoms were originally Tai-Shans. They came to Assam via the Patkai hills in the early part of the thirteenth century from upper Brahma under the leadership of Sukapha, who laid the foundation of their kingdom in Assam in the early part of the 13th century. They brought political integration to Assam and ruled Assam for about 600 years. The Ahoms brought with them three priestly classes, namely Deodhais, Mahans and Bailungs. They had their own deities, such as Phura, Tara, Along, Chomdeo, etc., which they worshipped according to their own rites through their priest. For the first two hundred years, the Ahoms continued to follow their traditional religion with sacrifices in their religious performances. Hindu influence first entered the Ahom court during the reign of King Sudangpha alias Bamuni Konwar (1397-1407AD), who had been brought up in a Brahmin family. Suhungmung alias Dihingia Raja (1497-1539 AD) was the first Ahom king who assumed the Hindu title Svarganarayana or Swargadev by which the later Ahom rulers were normally designated. His reign was marked by the growing influence of the Brahmins on the one hand, and the growth of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement promulgated by Sri Sri Sankardeva on the other hand. Towards the middle of the 17th century, the Ahom kings ruling over upper Assam had adopted a liberal outlook in the field of religion. The Ahom rulers showed, at the same time, due respect and courtesy to the Vaishnava monks, and also patronised the Ahom priests and allowed them to perform their rituals. Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663AD) was the first Ahom ruler to formally embrace Hinduism as a religion of the king. By the 17th century, the speedy growth of Neo-Vaishnavite movement with its popular appeal throughout the state brought about further changes to the Ahom religious policy. During the time of Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696 AD), Saktism strongly entered the Ahom court. From the early part of the 18th century, Saktism became one of the major religions of the Ahom court. By adopting the Sakta faith, by supporting the Vaishnava monks and Satras and by maintaining the orthodox Ahom rituals and ceremonies, the Ahom rulers encouraged a state or triarchy in religious matters, leading to a considerable amount of rivalry between the three groups. The objective of the paper is to study the religious policy of the Ahom rulers. The findings reveal that the importance attached to the Brahmanical fraction of Vaishnavism by the later Ahom rulers led to sectarian clashes, which finally led to the decay and fall of the monarchy.

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INTRODUCTION

India's The Ahoms were originally Tai-Shans. They came to Assam via the Patkai hills in the early part of the thirteenth century from upper Burma under the leadership of Sukapha, who laid the foundation of their kingdom in Assam with Charaideo as the capital in 1228 AD. They gradually extended their sway and became the masters of the whole of the Brahmaputra valley. They brought political integration to Assam and ruled Assam for about 600 years.

OBJECTIVES:

The objective of the study is to explore the religious policy of the Ahom rulers. The objective is divided into the following sub-objectives-

- To study the history of the Religious Policy of the Ahom rulers
- To study the impact of *Neo-Vaishnavism* and Brahmanical Hindu religion on Ahom rulers.

METHODOLOGY

The method of this research paper is analytical and historical. For the study, major sources of information are gathered from the Assamese Chronicles (*Buranjis*) bio-graphical works of the Vaishnava saints of medieval Assam (*charit puthi*), epigraphic and archaeological sources. Secondary sources in the form of articles published by different authors in different newspapers, periodicals, magazines, souvenir, etc. and books are also consulted to supplement the primary sources. In order to find out the picture of the religious policy of the Ahom rulers, not only have the available sources been scrutinised carefully, but an attempt has also been made to see things as objectively as possible.

Religious Policy of the Ahom Rulers

The Ahoms brought with them three priestly classes, namely Deodhais, Mahans and Bailungs. They had their own deities, such as *Phura*, *Tara*, *Along*, *Chomdeo*, etc., which they worshipped according to their own rites through their priest.¹

At the beginning of the Ahom rule, the Ahom priests Deodhais acted as political advisers, but they were gradually relegated to priestly functions and to the divining of events.² The Deodhais, Bailungs, Mahans and the Chirings were associated with all ceremonial occasions and sacrifices. These sacrifices were calculated to secure the welfare of the kings and the people, or were performed to bring victory to the Ahom arms, or to celebrate success in war. The association of Ahom priests was indispensable in the coronation of a monarch whom they blessed, uttering old-time verses in a musical tone, reminding him of the primordial gods *Phura-tara* or creator, *Lengdon* or Lord Indra, *Jasingpha* or the god of learning, *Phai* or god of fire, and *Kao-Kham* or god of water; and their own royal ancestors Khunlung and Khunlai, who were attributed divine origin.³ The image of *Chom cheng* (*Chomdeo*), which Sukapha had brought to his ancestral home, was the tutelary deity of the Ahom rulers till the end of their rule, and there were regular provisions from the state for the maintenance of the worship of this image.⁴

For the first two hundred years, the Ahoms continued to follow their traditional religion with sacrifices in their religious performances. The Ahom kings were not bigoted adherents of their faith, and they did not force their religion on anyone; they warmly embraced all men into their social fold if such absorption was calculated to add to their political strength.⁵ On their arrival in Upper Assam, the immediate concern of the Ahoms was their problem of defence and means of sustenance and hardly had anything to do with religion. Scions of the great Tai race, they were well known for their assimilative capacity and were called 'Ahoms' by the indigenous people. It carried a wider dimension with a deep socio-political significance. Socially, they became one among the local autochthonous groups and politically recognised and legitimised their political supremacy.⁶ They identified themselves completely with the indigenous groups because of their adaptability in matters of culture and religion. Socio-political and linguistic exigencies actuated them gradually to lean towards Hinduism.⁷ This was not on a mass scale nor because of the Hindu religion as such, but in the wake of a plural society which was slowly emerging out of the Ahom conquest, expansions and absorptions.⁸

The process of Hinduisation existed in north-east India since early times when the Kamrupa rulers patronised a large number of Brahmins. There was a setback with the disappearance of the kingdoms of Kamrupa, and in the absence of a strong centralised authority. The process revived in the Bhuyan chiefdoms and Chutiya kingdom in the east, but slowed down in Upper Assam with the arrival of the Ahoms when Ahomisation also started. The annexation and absorption of the Chutiya kingdom and the Bhuyan principalities, followed by the subjugation of the Koches on the west, led to the Ahomisation, which gave way to the Hinduisation.⁹ The Hindu influence gained ground and accelerated after the consolidation of the Ahom kingdom.

The Hinduisation of the Ahoms was partly the result of several accidental circumstances and partly the outcome of a deliberate policy. Hindu influence first entered the Ahom court during the reign of King Sudangpha alias *Bamuni Konwar* (1397-1407AD), who had been brought up in a Brahmin family. After accession to the throne, he brought his Brahman foster father and his sons to the capital campus along with the idol of *Lakshminarayana Salagrama* worshipped in the family of the Brahman.¹⁰ He looked upon the sons of the Brahmin, who were seven, as his own brothers, and therefore he gave them important posts on the frontier.¹¹ He also installed the Brahman as his confidential adviser.¹² The introduction of *Salagram* worship in the royal court and the appointment of his Brahman foster father as his adviser were significant events in the religious history of the Ahoms. After this event, Brahmanical rites and practices were begun in the Ahom court.¹³ Sudangpha also introduced some rites and rituals corresponding to Hindu practices. He performed the coronation ceremony called *Singari gharat utha* in resemblance to the Hindus *Raj-abhisheka* function. Thus, since the time of Sudangpha, Brahmanical religion and rites found an honoured place and patronage under the Ahom kings.¹⁴

The reigns of the five immediate successors of Sudangpha were mainly spent on suppressing the risings of the rebellious Naga tribes. During this period, Hinduism gained further grounds in the Ahom court, which is evident from the fact that Susenpha (1439-1488AD) patronised Hinduism by rebuilding the Naga-Sankar temple on the north bank of the Brahmaputra.¹⁵

Suhungmung alias Dihingia Raja (1497-1539 AD) was very interested in Hinduism, and it was during his time that the performance of Brahmanical ceremonies and rituals in the court became important occasions. He was the first Ahom king who assumed the Hindu title Svarganarayana or Swargadev by which the later Ahom rulers were normally designated.¹⁶ After that, the Ahom kings used this new designation in all their official documents.¹⁷ Suhungmung had also adopted the Saka era in the official calendar in place of the old system of calculating dates by the Jovian cycle of sixty years.¹⁸ The first *Buranji* in the Assamese language, 'Sri Sri Swarganarayana Deva Maharajar Janma Katha', was written during his time, wherein the Ahoms were assigned the Hindu origin relating them with the Hindu God Indra.¹⁹

Apart from the growing influence of the Brahmins, his reign also witnessed the growth of the Neo- Vaishnavite Movement promulgated by Sri Sri Sankardeva. The *Bhakti* Movement, popularly called in Assam as the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement, was launched by Sankardeva (1449-1568AD) and most of his followers in the 16th & 17th centuries. The movement headed by Sankardeva was not only a religious, but also a social reform movement. Adhering to the main principles of '*Bhakti*', this movement brought to the forefront the subaltern class of society by granting them equality with the higher classes in the religious plane. It also brought about an intellectual revolution by way of bringing the scriptural knowledge to the people through large-scale translation in the Assamese vernacular. Sankardeva instituted worship by books, replacing image and ritualism, and left a permanent legacy of it through the *Satra* institution, which rose to more than a thousand in number in the post- Sankardeva times. The post-Sankardeva times, however, saw significant developments in the new sect by way of sub-sectarian developments leading to its divisions into four distinct branches known as *Sanghati* or *Samhati*, such as *BrahmaSanghati*, *NikaSanghati*, *PurushSanghati* and *KalaSanghati*. The most outstanding and notable character of Assam Vaishnavism is the *Satra* institution, which is still functioning as a living organisation in Assam for propagating and diffusing Vaishnavite ideals. This institution was brought into existence by Sankardeva to serve as a centre of religious propagation and discussion. In the post- Sankardeva period, the institution developed and extended its network in the entire Brahmaputra Valley. The sub-sects created a network of *Satras* throughout the entire Brahmaputra Valley, and practically converted more than half of its population to Vaishnavism²⁰.

The reign of the Ahom king Suhungmung, alias Dihingia Raja, was marked by the growing influence of the Brahmins on the one hand, and the growth of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement promulgated by Sri Sri Sankardeva on the other hand. The sect very soon became popular among the masses, and the king,

having been alarmed by its deep popularity even more than that of the royalty, took stern measures against the propagators.

After Suhungmung, another stage of development of Hinduism is noticed during the reign of Suklen-mung alias Gargayan Raja (1539-1552 AD), who, besides retaining the Ahom traditional beliefs, encouraged Hindu practices in the court. He disfavoured the idea of having both *Lakshminarayan Salagram* and *Chom-Cheng (Chomdeo)* representing two different faiths in the palace.²¹ He therefore installed the image of *Chomdeo* in a separate temple outside the palace but within the palace campus.²² This indicates the growing predominance of Hinduism in the Ahom court. Since his time onwards, the influence of Brahmanism in the Ahom court had a swift growth. The chronicles record that king Sukhampha alias Khora Raja (1553-1603 A.D.) developed such an idea of Brahmanical superiority in the society that during the Koch invasion of the Ahom kingdom, the king to befool the Koch general Chilarai, formed a contingent of army of the various tribes including Brahmins from Habung and guised them as Brahmanas, each wearing a sacred thread and seated on a cow sent them to the battle field.²³ It is further recorded that Chilarai, having been afraid of shedding Brahman blood, returned without fighting the Brahman force.²⁴

Hinduism made considerable progress in the Ahom court during King Susengpha alias Pratap Singha (1603-1641AD). Although not formally converted to Hinduism, he became a devout Saiva.²⁵ Chronicles mention that he built two Siva temples – one at Dergaon and the other at Biswanath.²⁶ During his reign, worship of an earthen image of the goddess *Durgawas* also introduced in Assam.²⁷ The chronicles have recorded that it was at his instance that a few persons (*Marangiya Khanikar*) from Assam were sent to Koch- Behar to get training in the art of making earthen images of the goddess Durga, and since then the goddess was worshipped at the royal temple (*Devighar*).²⁸

The reign of Pratap Singha was a turning point in the history of the growth of Brahmanical Hinduism in the Ahom court in many other ways. He emphasised the importance of the caste system and that of the Brahmanas in the socio-political life of the state. He was the first Ahom monarch to replace the Ahom *Katakis* (ambassadors or messengers) with the Brahmanas.²⁹ Octagonal-shaped Ahom coins said to have been issued following a *sloka* in the *Yoginitantra*.³⁰

But the growing influence of Brahmanical religion could not replace the *Chomdeo* worship altogether, and before a battle was taking place, it was still the practice, according to the Ahom belief, to call upon the *Deodhais* to tell the omens by examining the legs of the fowls.³¹ These implies encouragement of the Brahmanical beliefs and at the same time retention of the Tai- Ahom customs.

King Surampha alias Bhaga Raja (1641-1644 A.D.), successor of Pratap Singha, adopted a more conciliatory policy, and he reconstructed the *Kuruabahi Satra* of the Neo Vaishnavite order and placed Jayaharideva as its head with gifts of lands and property.³²

Thus, towards the middle of the 17th century, the Ahom kings ruling over upper Assam had adopted a liberal outlook in the

field of religion. The Ahom rulers showed at the same time due respect and courtesy to the Vaishnava monks, and made grants and endowments for the maintenance of the Vaishnava Satras or monasteries. They also patronised the Ahom priests and allowed them to perform their rituals and to participate in the royal ceremonies as prayer-men.

Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663AD) was the first Ahom ruler to formally embrace Hinduism as a religion of the king. In 1654 A.D., he performed a *yagna* at Galpur Ghat by installing the image of the deity, Govinda Thakur, at that place and received initiation (*sarana*) from a Vaishnava priest called Niranjan Bapu of Kuruwabahi Satra.³³ After the initiation ceremony, Niranjandeva was installed as the head of a newly built Satra, which came to be known as Auniati Satra. He also established two otherbig Satras in Majuli, namely Dakhinpat and Garamur, and installed two Brahmana *Gosains*, Vanamalideva and Laksminarayana, as Adhikar of these Satras. It was Jayadhvaj Singha who offered rehabilitation to the families of the daughters of Sankardeva's grandsons, Purusottama and Chaturbhuj.³⁴ The king placed the Auniati Satra in an unassailable position as No. 1 Satra alongwith Dakhinpat, Kuruwabahi and Garamur, and this order was maintained till the Ahom regime lasted.³⁵ Thus, although this monarch patronised Vaishnavism, the influence of its *Bamuniya* division (*Brahma Sanghati*) gained a permanent foothold in the capital, much to the disadvantage of others of the Order.³⁶ However, since the time of Jayadhvaj Singha, the Satra institution became so popular among the Ahom kings that more than six hundred Satras sprang up one after another all over Assam during the reign of the subsequent Ahom kings, which were headed either by Brahmin *Gosains* or by Sudra Mahantas.

Chakradhvaj Singha (1663-1669 AD), successor of Jayadhvaj Singha, showed keen interest in and devotion to Banamali *Gosain* of Dakhinpat Satra.³⁷ Many of the Ahom nobles and officials during his period took initiation from Brahman *Gosain* or other Sudra Mahantas.

Sunyatpha alias Udayaditya Singha (1669-1673 A.D.), the successor of Chakradhvaj Singha, became a disciple of the Chamaguri Satra of the Purusha Samhati.³⁸

Vaishnavism also dominated in the Ahom palace during the reign of Ramdhvaj Singha (1673-1675 A.D.), Sujinpha Dihingiya Raja (1675-1677 A.D.), Sudaipha alias Parbatiya Raja (1677-1679 AD) and Sulikpha alias Lora Raja (1679-1681 AD). Ramdhvaj Singha became a disciple of the Narowa Mahanta and promoted his Satra in different ways.³⁹ Sujinpha Dihingiya Raja was a disciple of the Mahanta of Mayamara Satra.⁴⁰ Sulikpha alias Lora Raja was the disciple of the Brahman Mahanta of the Dakhinpat Satra, who seems to have interfered in matters of politics.⁴¹

The advent of the Tungkhungia Dynasty with Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696 AD) as its first ruler marked a turning point. Their advent witnessed the gradual replacement of the Vaishnava influence from the Ahom court by a proportionate encouragement to Saktism. Gadadhar Singha considered Vaishnavism to be too passive and mild to be suitable for a ruling class that had to maintain its dominion by force of arms.⁴² The growing power of the monasteries, resembling a

state within a state, and the outlook of the Satradhikars towards the Hinduised or non -Hindu population, might have aroused a sense of fear least could destroy the very essence of the ideal with which the Ahoms ruled the country. Gadadhar Singha wanted to build the kingdom on strong foundations, and he could not tolerate any institution that might divert the attention of the people from the main purposes of the state and divide their allegiance between the temporal and spiritual authorities. That is why Gadadhar Singha undertook a very drastic policy of curbing the power of the Satras. It is also said that Gadadhar Singha acted thus only under Sakta influence.⁴³

There might have been, however, reactions in the society as a result of Gadadhar Singha's policy of Vaishnava persecution. As a result, his son and successor Rudra Singha (1696-1714AD) patronised both the religious sects- Vaishnavism and Saktismwith the clear intention of appeasing them all.

However, from Jayadvaj Singha onwards, at least till the time Sulikpha, Vaishnavism of Brahmanical order became the predominant creed of the Ahom kingdom. Vaishnavism, which was already becoming the major popular religion of the land, thus now became more widespread and well established in the state. Even severe and brutal persecution of Gadadhar Singha could not root out its existence. In the later part of the Ahom rule, a new post called Satriya Barua was created to look after the working and management of the Satras. The royal patronage placed many Satras on sound economic footing and security, and thereby helped them to spread neo- Vaishnavite movement in the state without any hindrance. As a matter of fact, a large number of peoples including powerful officers of the court, became Vaishnava disciples. Although neo- Vaishnavism did not find a secure footing in the Ahom kingdom in the initial stage, the condition gradually improved. By the end of the 17th century, Ahom rulers realised the mass-based popularity of the movement. As a result, the movement reached its climax, and the period of the later 17th century may be called the era of the growth of the neo-Vaishnavite in Assam.

The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement, which was strongly entrenched in the Ahom kingdom in the early part of the 17th century, had received a setback after one hundred years. During the time of Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696 AD), Saktism strongly entered the Ahom court. From the early part of the 18th century, Saktism became one of the major religions of the Ahom court. By adopting the Sakta faith, by supporting the Vaishnava monks and Satras and by maintaining the orthodox Ahom rituals and ceremonies, the Ahom rulers encouraged a state or triarchy in religious matters, leading to a considerable amount of rivalry between the three groups.⁴⁴

Saktism was one of the most popular forms of religious beliefs of the people of the Brahmaputra Valley since early times. It retained the same popularity throughout the period of the Ahom rule in Assam. After the spread of the Neo- Vaishnavite Movement in the Brahmaputra valley, the popularity of the Saktism had greatly reduced. Even though its influence was slightly undermined, it was not totally routed out. This could be seen in the patronage accorded to it by the royal family, as well as a section of the common masses. The Ahom kings not only built Siva temples in number all over the state but also

organised Durga Puja in their household. But with the introduction of the Bhakti Movement in Assam, the practice of Saktism became limited. Saktism involves Brahmanical priesthood and elaborate rituals. So, functions such as Durga Puja, Sivaratri, etc. attracted mass people, even Vaishnavas, who not only enjoyed participating in these festivals at the royal household, but also made all sorts of contributions. Thus, having possessed the elements of both tribal and non-tribal populations, contemporary society embraced Saktism as the favoured belief of the people. At the same time, the Ahom rulers, who were very much accustomed to blood sacrifice in worshipping their own gods and goddesses, had found in Saktism considerable affinity of belief, due to which they were much attracted to this sect from the very beginning.

Rudra Singha first favoured Vaishnavism and accepted initiation from Harideva Gosain of Auniati Satra. But subsequently, he realised that by joining hands with the Vaishnavas, he would not be able to strengthen the position of the monarchy, because the powerful Satra institution would mar the image of the king sooner or later.⁴⁵ He, therefore, decided to utilise Saktism as a weapon against the Vaishnavism and for this, he preferred to bring a strong Sakta Brahmana priest from Bengal. He brought Krishnaram Bhattacharya Nyayabagis from Nadia (Bengal), who was a well-known Sakta priest. But before he could receive initiation, Rudra Singha died at Guwahati.⁴⁶ Rudra Singha, however, instructed his sons to receive initiation from the Bengal priest. Accordingly, his eldest son Siva Singha(1714-1744AD) became the king and following the instructions of his deceased father, he placed the priest in charge of the Kamakhya temple on the Nilachal hill at Guwahati. The priest, for that reason, was also known as *Parbatiya Gosain*.

In the year 1722 AD. King Siva Singha was told by the Brahman astrologers that his rule would shortly come to an end as he was under the evil influence of the stars (*Chatra-bhanga Yoga*).⁴⁷ The remedy suggested for it was his retirement from state affairs and the propitiation of different gods and goddesses.⁴⁸ Accordingly, at the suggestion of the Parbatiya Gosain, the king vested the sovereign power in the hands of his queen Phuleswari, who was a staunch follower of Saktism and was more under the influence of the Parbatiya Gosain than even her husband.⁴⁹ She assumed the name Pramatheswari, which was one of the names of the goddess Durga.⁵⁰ She immediately exercised tremendous influence on the king's person, and after being vested with sovereign power with the title Bar Raja (the great king), she became the *de facto* ruler of the kingdom. She gave up the old Ahom burial system (*Maidam bandha*) and started cremating dead bodies.⁵¹ A non-Ahom girl, Phuleswari, had no idea of using religion for political benefits, but she even attempted to make Saktism the State religion.⁵² With this view, she ordered all the Vaishnava Gosains to worship the idol of goddess Durga and forced the Sudra Mahantas to bow their heads before the Brahmana Gosains of Auniati and Dakhinpat. She then forbade the worship of other gods in the kingdom and, holding a temporary camp at Sonarijan, supervised the work of bringing the idols of other deities from the *Devalayas* (temples) and throwing them away to the Brahmaputra.⁵³ Idols of Durga

made of stone and brass-metal were then placed in every temple, and all people were ordered to worship them.⁵⁴ With her neophytic zeal, she then invited the Sudra Mahantas to attend the celebration of Durga Puja held at the capital, where she compelled them to bow their heads before the image of the goddess, to accept the *Prasad* and *nirmali*, and to forehead besmeared with the blood of the sacrificed animals.⁵⁵ This event had mortally affected the Vaishnava Gosains so much that after that event, they vowed to avenge this grave insult.⁵⁶

Throughout his reign, Siva Singha paid very little attention to the administration of the country and devoted most of his time to religious pursuits. He erected several temples and made a large number of land grants to the Brahmanas, so that out of a total of forty-eight copper plates recording land grants to temples and Brahmanas by all the Ahom monarchs, nineteen belong to him.⁵⁷ Thus, an all-out effort was made by the monarchy to make Saktism a counter force against the growing power of the Vaishnava Satras. Alongside, he made land-grants with the services of paiks to some Brahmana Satras as well.⁵⁸ This he might have done because he considered the support of the Brahmana Satras essential to give Saktism a strong foothold in the country. Thus, the period of Siva Singha can rightly be called a period of predominance of Saktism and Brahmanical priesthood in the Ahom court.

The adoption of Saktism as the chief religious belief by the Ahom monarchs, thereby showing a marked disrespect to the Mayamara Vaishnavism, the puritan section of the Neo-Vaishnavism, soon created a tense atmosphere in the society. Along with the king and his family members, several state dignitaries also took to Saktism and showed disrespect to the Vaishnava counterparts. As a result, not only the Vaishnavas of the Mayamara sect, but also the orthodox Ahom priests, i.e. the Deodhais and the Bailungs, became completely dissatisfied with the pro- Sakta attitude of the Ahom monarchs and their officers.

Pramatta Singha(1744-1751AD), the successor of Siva Singha, also continued to patronise Saktism and erected the Rudreswar and Sukreswar temples at Guwahati.⁵⁹ Pramatta Singha was succeeded by his brother, Rajeswar Singha(1751-1769AD), the fourth son of Rudra Singha. During his period influence of Saktism in the Ahom court made both the king and his officers "priest-ridden and sectarian disputes had begun to strangle their patriotic aspirations".⁶⁰ He took initiation from Nati Gosain, a relative of the Parbatiya Gosain, and gave him a temple at Pandunath.⁶¹ Several other Siva temples at Guwahati and Dergaon were also repaired or rebuilt during his reign.⁶²

Rajeswar Singha died in May 1769, and he was succeeded by his younger brother Lakshmi Singha. Lakshmi Singha was also a staunch Sakta by faith. He took initiation from Ramananda Acharyya, a local Sakta priest, whom he established at Pohumara in Majuli with a vast extent of land-grant and came to be known as Pahumariya Gosain, and later as Na Gosain.⁶³ During the reign of Lakshmi Singha, Saktism became a major religion of the Ahom court.

Thus, during the reign of the later Ahom rulers, Saktism became the predominant religion in the royal house. Ahom rulers were very much opposed to the elements of equality,

fraternity and brotherhood present in the tenets of Neo-Vaishnavism. They were gradually more attached to Saktism and less friendly to Vaishnavism, especially to its puritan section belonging to the Mayamara branch of the *Kala Samhati* order.

CONCLUSION

Thus, though at the beginning, the Ahom rulers followed a policy of non-intervention with the existing religious beliefs of the local people and tried to maintain, for all practical purposes, their own beliefs and customs, but gradually they inclined towards local beliefs, and despite retaining their old beliefs and customs till the last, they accepted Brahmanical Hinduism as their prime religion. The divisive state religious policy towards the Satras created strong resentment among those Satras that did not receive patronage, while those that were patronised simply despised the others. These new developments led to serious socio-political consequences. The importance attached to the Brahmanical fraction of Vaishnavism by the later Ahom rulers led to sectarian clashes, which finally led to the decay and fall of the monarchy.

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About the corresponding author

Dr Pranjal Bhuyan is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at Tengakhat College, Dibrugarh, Assam, India. He is actively involved in teaching and research, with academic interests in Indian history, the regional history of Assam, historiography, and interdisciplinary approaches to historical studies.