

The Interplay of State and Religion in the Brahmaputra Valley from 16th to the 18th Centuries

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This paper intends to analyze the frequently changing relationships between the Ahom state and the Vaishnava *Sattras*. The Ahom state, throughout their rule, followed different policies of persecution, peace and patronage to deal with the Vaishnava *Sattras* keeping in mind the exigencies of the time. Sometimes the Vaishnava saints were persecuted by the Ahom kings and sometimes they were patronised. Sometimes a period of comparative peace prevailed. This paper draws upon what made the Ahom rulers to be in continuous rift with the Vaishnavas. It also looks at the Ahom state's acceptance and patronization of the Brahminical religion and their persecution of the Vaishnava saints of few *Sattras*; the reason behind the persecution of the Vaishnava preceptors of some selective *Sattras* and how it affected the social structure and political scenario of the time.

Keywords: *Sattra*, Vaishnavism, Ahom state, State and Religion, Shaktism

Introduction

The relationship between the Ahom state and the *Sattra* institution formed a very interesting chapter of the history of the medieval period. Throughout the rule of six hundred years, the Ahom kings followed different policies of persecution, peace and patronage to deal with the Vaishnava *Sattras* keeping in mind the exigencies of the time. Sometimes the Vaishnava saints were persecuted by the Ahom kings and sometimes they were patronised. Sometimes a period of comparative peace prevailed. The interaction of the state and the *Sattra* was far from smooth. However, from the late sixteenth century onwards the *Sattras* got divided and gave birth to four *samhatis* or orders. From the seventeenth century onwards they further divided into pro-state and anti-state *Sattras*. The pro-state *Sattras* succeeded in getting the support of the Ahom monarchy whereas the preachers of the anti-state *Sattras* were mostly persecuted.

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In the initial phase the hostility between the Ahom state and Vaishnavism was mainly due to political problems along with the religious contradictions. Though the hostility took a serious colour in the later phase of Vaishnavism, it began during the time of Sankardeva, the founder of Vaishnava movement, itself. As far as the political hostility between the Ahom kingdom and Sankardeva, who was a Bhuyan, is concerned we can trace it back to the Ahom conquest of Bhuyan principalities. After the establishment of the Ahom kingdom the Bhuyans, who were before the arrival of the Ahoms a prominent socio-political group, were sought to be subordinated. The Ahom kings settled the Bhuyans in small groups in different parts of the region by giving them land grants. Sankardeva also belonged to this community. He was attached to the Bhuyan group which was settled at a place called Dhuwahat. The Ahom kings engaged them in different activities. The Bhuyans settled in Dhuwahat were engaged in elephant catching or *Kheda* operation. The Bhuyans who were primarily agriculturists were not suitable for this activity and they were unsuccessful in catching elephants as they were not trained for this purpose. The Ahom king thereupon unleashed a reign of terror on them and officials were despatched to inflict severe punishments. Sankardeva and few others, however, escaped but Hari Bhuyan (Sankardeva's son-in-law) was beheaded and Madhabdeva, another Vaishnava saint who was also captured, was however spared for being a holy person, as he was heard reciting *kirtana* (Barua, 1985: 452).

Thus, it can be seen at this stage that the Ahom opposition to the Bhuyans was largely political. Meanwhile, the Vaishnava faith began to threaten the livelihood and social position of the Brahmins. Vaishnavism came to the fore at a time when Brahmanical religion was enjoying its dominant position. Therefore, the Brahmins instigated the Ahom monarchy against the Vaishnava preachers by saying that they were destroying their socio-religious status by preaching a completely new faith which opposed the Brahmanical rituals and practices. Since initially majority of the Vaishnava preachers belonged to the Bhuyan community, especially its founder head Sankardeva, the Brahmins were successful in their plan as the Ahom kings had already developing an antagonism towards them. Sankardeva had to leave the Ahom kingdom because of the opposition and challenges faced from the Brahmin priests and scholars who poisoned the ears of the Ahom king. Due to the hostile attitude of the Ahom kings he moved from the Ahom kingdom and shifted to Kamrup (Koch Kamrup) and settled in Patbausi, near present day Barpetta district.

The attitude of the Ahom kings towards Vaishnava preachers was based more or less on the temperament of different kings, Brahmanical influence over them and also the needs of the time. But by the late seventeenth century the relation between the Ahom state and the *Sattras* was shaped more by political and economic factors rather than the temperament of the monarchy.

The hostility towards the Vaishnavas continued even after the death of Sankardeva. Pratap Singha's reign was marked by the persecution of Vaishnava preachers. The successor of Vamsigopaladeva, Misradeva, was captured by Pratap Singha who died in prison and his Kuruwabahi *Sattras* was destroyed (Bhuyan, 1988 : 64). Two of the colleagues of Gopaladeva namely, Mukunda Gosain and Balabhadra Ata were

also beheaded by Pratap Singha. According to Edward Gait the persecution of the Gurus and destruction of their *Sattras* was done primarily at the instigation of the Brahmins (Gait, 2008 : 121). This seems possible as the insecurity of the Brahmins at the rising influence of Vaishnava movement was only growing. The Vaishnava Movement began to have a huge influence over the people of the Brahmaputra valley. Therefore, the Brahmins feared losing their former position and sources of income and as a result of this they possibly instigated the Ahom kings against the Vaishnava preachers.

The successors of Pratap Singha also adopted an attitude of intolerance towards the Vaishnava preachers. One of the *Adhikara* of the Mayamara *Sattra*, Nityanandadeva, was put to death at the order of Ahom king Surampha or Bhaga Raja or Jayaditya Singha (1641-1644). Jayaditya Singha also made a number of attempts to kill Bar-Yadumani of Bahbari *Sattra* as the king suspected him of disloyalty. During the reign of Sutyinpha or Naria Raja (1644-1648), who was the immediate successor of Jayaditya Singha, the Vaishnava preachers were not spared. Three of the sons of Bar-Yadumani of Bahbari were either killed or tortured following the order of Naria Raja. They were charged with conspiracy against the king and the king Naria Raja punished them without a proper enquiry into the matter (Sarma, 1966: 181). After Naria Raja, Sutamla alias Jayadhvaja Singha (1648-1663) became the king of the Ahom kingdom. He was the first king who had openly accepted Hinduism. He was also the first Ahom king who became the disciple of a Vaishnava *Gosain*. He became the disciple of Niranjanadeva and built him a *Sattra* at Auniati in the Majuli island in 1653 A.D. Niranjanadeva was the nephew of the head of Kuruwabahi *Sattra*. It was the first state patronised *Sattra* which got enormous royal favour. From Koch Bihar he brought Banamali Bapu and made him another *Sattra* at Dakhinapat (Bhuyan, 1988 : 74). Jayadhvaja Singha played a significant role in the establishment of four great *Sattras* of the Brahma order in the eastern part of Assam. These were – Auniati, Dakhinapat, Kuruwabahi and Garmur *Sattra*. These four *Sattras* were called *chari-Sattras* and the Ahom state gave these four *Sattras* an impregnable position in the Ahom court. However, it would be wrong if we assume that the Vaishnava preachers lived peacefully during his reign. There were instances of Vaishnava persecution in his reign too. The *Sattras* at this time got divided into four different *samhatis* or orders viz. Brahma or Bamuniya *samhati*, Nika *samhati*, Purusa or Mahapurusiya *samhati* and Kala *samhati*. According to Edward Gait, Jayadhvaja Singha persecuted the *Mahapurusiya* sect and also killed few of its leading members (Gait, 2008 : 140). The Bamuniya *Sattras* belonging to the Brahma order gained an upper-hand and a permanent position in the Ahom court while the status of the non-Brahmin *Sattras* did not change. They still had to face royal persecution and many a times were forced to adopt Brahmanical rituals and practices. This signified the fact that during his rule ‘peace of the Vaishnavas’ meant peace of the Brahma division of the Vaishnavas and not the non-Brahmin division whose status was still the same.

After Jayadhvaja Singha, Supungmung alias Chakradhvaja Singha (1663-1670) came to the throne. There was a quick succession of seven rulers from Chakradhvaja Singha’s reign to Gadadhar Singha’s reign (1681-1696). It is generally said that in

this period from Chakradhvaj Singha to Gadadhar Singha's reign the Vaishnava preachers lived comparatively in peace. The quick succession of the Ahom rulers can be attributed to the internal and external instability of the Ahom kingdom. The internal stability of the Ahom kingdom was disturbed by the Ahom nobles who played a significant role in the king-making process and tried to make the monarchs puppets in their hands. The external instability could be attributed to the intensification of the Mughal aggression under Mir Jumla and Ram Singh (Bhuyan, 1962 : 46-50). Due to the enormity of this external threat faced by the Ahoms, their focus was drawn away from the Vaishnava movement and their preachers. The preoccupation of the Ahom kings with the Mughals led the Vaishnava *gurus* to live in comparative peace and preach their faith.

The relationship between the *Sattrra* and the state further deteriorated towards the end of the seventeenth century particularly from the time of the Tungkhungia Dynasty. The Tungkhungia Dynasty was established by Gadadhar Singha who ascended the throne in 1681 A.D. and the princes of the Tungkhungia Dynasty continued to rule till the termination of the Ahom rule in 1826 A.D.

Gadadhar Singha's reign continued for fifteen years from 1681 A.D. to 1696 A.D. The hostility between the Ahom state and the *Sattrra* increased during his reign and a change can be seen in their relation i.e. unlike the earlier Ahom rulers Gadadhar Singha not only persecuted the *bhakats* of the non-Brahmin *Sattrras* but his persecution extended even to the *Sattrras* of the Brahma order. His reign was marked by the highest persecution of the Vaishnava preachers. Most of the chronicles uniformly gave a reason for the hostile attitude of Gadadhar Singha towards the Vaishnavites. The predecessor of Gadadhar Singha, Sulikpha or Lora Raja or Rahadhvaj Singha (1679-1681), was made king at the age of fourteen years by the noble Laluk Barphukan. During the reign of Lora Raja the affairs of the state were primarily handled by the nobles Laluk Barphukan and Marangi Barbarua (Bhuyan, 1968 : 17). According to the Ahom criteria for the suitability to become a king only those princes who did not have any deformity in their body were eligible (Gait, 2008 : 241). Thus in order to preserve their authority in the Ahom court through the puppet king Lora Raja, Barpukhan and Barbarua had the king order a search for the scions of the royal family who would then either be made unfit for kingship by mutilation of their limbs or killed. The Burha Raja or Gadapani, who later came to be known as Gadadhar Singha, fled away by leaving his wife, sons and home. Meanwhile Gadapani's wife was caught and was punished and tortured but she did not utter a word about Gadapani. She died in the midst of the torture.

During this period of hardship and difficulty Gadapani took refuge in the Dakhinapat *Sattrra* situated at a place called Kalabari in the north bank of river Brahmaputra. In this period Chota Banamali Bapu was the *Sattrradhikara* or the head of the Dakhinapat *Sattrra*. Gadapani met him and asked for his help in acquiring the throne for himself. Banamali Bapu showed no interest in his plea and instead of helping the prince gave him a cold response. This denial of help on the part of Banamali Bapu may be due to the fact that the reigning monarch Sulikpha or Lora Raja was his disciple (Bhuyan, 1988 : 121). Moreover, in the *Sattrra* Gadapani was treated like an ordinary disciple. He was made to stay with lay disciples and even the food given to

him was of very low quality (Bhuyan, 1968 : 15).

The contemporary chronicles and many other scholars gave the opinion that when Gadapani alias Gadadhar Singha became the king, he took revenge of the insult meted out to him at the Dakhinapat *Sattras* by persecuting the *Gosains*. But if we carefully analyze the information provided by the *Auniati Sattrar Buranji* it can be seen that Gadadhar Singha commenced the persecution of the Vaishnava *Gosains* after twelve years of his rule (Sarma, 1975 : 112). Now the question arises as to why did he wait for twelve years to punish the *Gosains*? He could have done that immediately after his accession to the throne. Thus the insult of Gadadhar Singha by the *Satradhikar* Banamali Bapu cannot be the sole reason for the persecution of the Vaishnavas. There seem to be many other possible reasons for this persecution.

The persecution of the Vaishnavas seems more to be due to politico-economic factors than just the personal grievances of Gadadhar Singha. When Gadadhar Singha was staying at the Dakhinapat *Sattras* he witnessed the massive wealth of the *Sattras*. The splendour of the *Satradhikars* and the huge functionaries attached to the *Sattras* also attracted his attention (Bhuyan, 1988 : 121). By the seventeenth century the *Sattras* accumulated huge wealth. They began the practice of initiating the king, a practice discouraged by Sankardeva, the founder of Vaishnavism in Assam. By this time the disciples of the *Sattras* constituted the Ahom officials viz. Rajkhowa, Phukan, Saikia, Hazarika and Borah. Sometimes there also happened to be a reserved tradition of selecting officials like Phukan, Hazarika and Saikia from among the *bhakats* or disciples of the *Sattras* by the Ahom state. Many a times the king and the rich nobles made grants to the *Sattras* which included land grants. The *Sattras* grew very rich as they had vast extents of land under them which sometimes exceed 33,000 *puras* and they also enjoyed the services of hundreds of *paiks* which were donated to the *Sattras*. The *Gosains* of the *Sattras* enjoyed services almost equal to that of the Ahom kings with an exception of the '*Kekora-dolas*' or royal palanquins and elephants (Bhuyan, 1968 : 29).

In the initial phases of Vaishnavism, particularly during Sankardeva's period, there was a rule established within the community of *bhakats* that none of the *bhakats* or even the *Mahantas* were allowed to keep more than a '*katha*' (one-fifth of a seer) of rice in storage after having two course of daily meals. If the *bhakat* had more than a *katha* of rice, then he had to give away the rice to others or to the common store of the *Sattras* so that it could be used to feed those *bhakats* who could not manage their alms on a particular day. These *Mahantas* were known as the '*caul-kathiya Mahanta*' or the *Mahantas* who had to subsist on only a *katha* of rice per day. But after the *Sattras* got divided, it became a smaller version of the Ahom kingdom. Like the Ahom state, the *Sattras* also started collecting religious tax called '*Guru-Kar*' from its disciples instead of voluntary presents made by the disciples which was the case in its early phase. Now the people were bound to pay taxes to the state as well as to the *Sattras*. This was also the period when the Vaishnavas were not permitted to give *sarana* or initiation to kings as it would create hierarchy within the faith. All these practices were meant for giving everyone an equal footing in the society. But in the later phase the *Mahantas* became very wealthy as the *Sattras* began to give *sarana* or

initiation to the kings and other members of the ruling class and received huge grants and endowments from them. Many of the *Sattras* even accepted Brahminical rituals and practices patronized by the state which bought them massive land grants and wealth from the ruling class. The four principal *Sattras* of the Brahma *samhati* or order viz. Auniati, Garmur, Dakhinapat and Kuruabahi became very wealthy and prosperous as they were patronised by the kings and high officials of the Ahom kingdom.

Thus it can be seen that the predecessors and even the successors of Gadadhar Singha patronised the Brahmins and the *Sattras* of the Brahma *samhati*. These rulers persecuted the Vaishnava preachers of the *Sattras* of the other three *samhatas* viz. Kala, Nika and Purusa *samhati* and protected and patronised the *Sattras* of the Brahma order. However, during the reign of Gadadhar Singha even the Brahma order *Sattras* were persecuted. There are mainly two reasons for this hostile attitude of Gadadhar Singha – political and economic. The political reason was that the vast wealth and splendour of the *Sattras* alarmed the king. It is already mentioned that during his stay at the Dakhinapat *Sattra* he had noticed that the pleasure of the *bhakats* and the number of ceremonies conducted at some point surpassed even the splendour and luxury of the Ahom king and his court (Bhuyan, 1968: 15). Gadadhar Singha even noticed a large image of Vishnu made of gold possessed by the *Sattradhikar* Banamali Bapu. There is even a reference of Rangacharan Bejdoloi, who was the *Bhandari Barua* or officer in-charge of the royal store, telling Gadadhar Singha that: Why should there be wealth and property in the establishment of a religious devotee? A few grains of rice constitute his only article of necessity and even this is given to him by his devotees and disciples. If the king permits I can acquire this wealth for His Majesty (Bhuyan, 1968: 28).

Gadadhar Singha permitted *Bhandari Barua* to recover the wealth from the *Sattras*. *Bhandari Barua* headed an expedition and brought back the Vishnu image made up of gold from the Dakhinapat *Sattra*. The other wealth of the Dakhinapat and other *Sattras* viz. cows, buffaloes and other valuable goods were also confiscated. There were several other references of the confiscation of the wealth from the *Gosains*. For instance, Ram Bapu, the *Gosain* of the Dakhinapat *Sattra*, was deprived of his property which was confiscated, and the gold and silver idols were melted down (Bhuyan, 1969: 111-117).

Thus by seeing the wealth, luxury, functionaries and vast disciples of the *Sattras*, Gadadhar Singha perhaps believed that the *Sattras* were becoming a threat to the authority of the Ahom kingdom. There is no doubt that by the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries the *Sattras* had grown very rich. Initially the *Sattras* were constructed to spread the Vaishnava faith far and wide. But later on, after the death of Sankardeva, the *Sattras* engrossed themselves into the accumulation of wealth. The massive structure of the *Sattras*, its tremendous wealth and luxury, large number of devotees and disciples and taxes collected from them, huge lands of the *Sattras* and a large number of functionaries – all these made the *Sattras* a ‘state within a state’ from being mere religious monasteries. Gadadhar Singha found this massive arrangement a threat to the Ahom kingdom and this formed one of the most important reasons for

the persecution of the Vaishnava preachers, confiscation of their wealth and the demolition of the *Sattra*.

The second important reason for the persecution of the *bhakats* by Gadadhar Singha was economic. This calls for a discussion on the *paik* and the *khel* system. The *paik* and the *khel* systems were designed by the Ahom state as systems of compulsory labour exploitation. In addition to this the social organization and administrative machinery of the Ahoms rested upon these two systems. The Ahom state introduced the *paik* and the *khel* system in upper or eastern Assam from the days when they introduced settled agriculture. During that time the *paik* system was not very organized. The first Ahom king who attempted to organize the *paik* and the *khel* system was king Pratap Singha in 1611 A.D. However, it was Jayadhvaj Singha who had further organized this system in an exhaustive and extensive manner in 1653 A.D.

All the people between the age group of 16 to 50 came under the *paik* system. Each and every individual of the state was called a *paik*. A *got* was the primary unit of production. Initially a *got* consisted of four *paiks* however, from the reign of Rajeswar Singha three *paiks* formed a *got*. Every *paik* had to provide compulsory personal service to the state. Each *paik* from each *got* had to render service turn by turn for three months a year and he was not liable for any wages. When one *paik* from the *got* was busy in serving the state, the other members of the *got* were bound to look after his household and land. During the times of emergency, sometimes the state called two *paiks* and sometimes even three. Such situations put the remaining members of the *got* in difficulty as they had to look after the land and household of all four of them. The *paiks* were liable to carry out both personal as well as public works. The public works of the *paiks* included the construction activities like the construction of roads, tanks, dams and ponds; land reclamation from the forests; levelling of lands for the purpose of cultivation; construction of temples and other buildings. In times of peace, the *paiks* were entitled to this kind of public works whereas in times of emergency, they were made to erect huge fortifications and serve as soldiers since the Ahom kingdom did not have any regular army (Gait, 2008 : 251).

The *khel* system refers to a system of categorizing of *paiks*. Earlier the *khels* were organised on the basis of territory but in the course of time they came to be identified on the basis of clans who belonged to their respective territories. All the *kanri* and *chamua paiks* were organized under this system. Some of the *khels* consisted of those communities, who were skilled at some special crafts or activities like collection of gold and ivory, weaving of clothes, making of iron instruments, honey suppliers, bow makers, bow shooters etc. These *paiks* had to give a proportion of their produce to the king or the nobility in place of rendering compulsory services to the state. All the ownership rights of the land given to the *paiks* belonged to their respective *khels*. The distribution of the *khels* was made among the high nobles of the Ahom state. For instance, Boras had command over a unit of twenty *paiks*, Saikias over a unit of hundred *paiks*, Hazarikas over a unit of one thousand *paiks*, Rajkhowas over a unit of three thousand *paiks* and Phukans over a unit of six thousand *paiks*. These officials had to supply *paiks* as soldiers to the state during the time of emergency.

The Ahom ruler Jayadvaj Singha (1648-1663), during his reign, exempted the celibate *bhakats* from rendering personal services of the state. As a result of this more and more *paiks* began to take refuge in the *Sattras* in order to escape the compulsory labour services. The *Sattras* became the refuge for a large number of oppressed and disgruntled *paiks*. Thousands of *paiks* became *bhakats* by taking initiation from the *Sattras* and by the time Gadadhar Singha ascended the throne, it became a matter of serious concern. Gadadhar Singha realized the loss of labour services as huge number of *kanri paiks* became *bhakats* just to forgo the compulsory state services. He passed an order that in the *Sattras* only celibate or unmarried *bhakats* should reside and married *bhakats* should vacate the *Sattras* immediately (Bhuyan, 1968 : 41).

When the *paiks* became *bhakats* it is very much apparent that the state suffered from the loss of labour force. Once the *paiks* became *bhakats* they adopted a laid-back attitude. A number of chronicles recorded one incident of Gadadhar Singha's reign. The chronicles say that once Gadadhar Singha heard the sound of clapping of hands when he was travelling with an official. He sent his official to enquire. On return the official said that the Vaishnava *bhakats* were doing *nama-prasanga* and praying and the sound came from there. This 'leisurely and pleasure seeking' attitude of the *bhakats* alarmed the king and he ordered for the capture of the *bhakats* and brought them back to the service of the state. Gadadhar Singha constructed a road by employing some of these *bhakats* and the road came to be known as '*Dhodar Ali*' (Barua, 2012 : 72-73). The word '*Dhodar Ali*' means a road constructed by 'the lazy and pleasure seekers'.

Therefore, it can be said that the reason for Gadadhar Singha's persecution of Vaishnava *bhakats* centred more on political and economic factors rather than personal revenge. By the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries the Vaishnava *Sattra* had become an alternative power centre to the Ahom kingdom. Gadadhar Singha had seen how the *Gosains* and *bhakats* in the *Sattras* lived at ease and enjoyed all the comforts which only royalty was supposed to enjoy. The *bhakats* of the *Sattras* were even promoted to the state offices of Rajkhowa, Bora, Saikia, Phukan and Hazarika. This immense power in the hands of the *Sattras* proved to be a threat to the Ahom kingdom. Gadadhar Singha realized the fact that if the *Sattras* were not stopped immediately then it would be detrimental to the state. The state would have to function according to the whims and fancies of the *Gosains*. On the other hand accumulation of large number of *kanri paiks* by the *Sattras* also became an economic threat as the scarcity of *kanri paiks* caused difficulty in the state services.

Edward Gait in *A History of Assam* gave another reason for Gadadhar Singha's hostility towards the Vaishnava saints. He said that the vegetarian food habits preached by Vaishnava saints affected the martial spirit of the people of the region. He gave the argument that Gadadhar Singha feared the physical deterioration of his people if they continued to abstain from eating the flesh of swine, cattle and fowls and from taking strong drinks (Gait, 1981 : 133). This could also be one of the reasons for the persecution of Vaishnavas.

Many scholars suggested that Gadadhar Singha's strong inclination towards Shaktism was the main reason for the persecution of Vaishnavas. Gadadhar Singha

was a believer of the Shakta order but he was not a fanatic. It is true that while persecuting the *bhakats*, those who belonged to the higher castes viz. Brahmins, Kalitas, Kayasthas and Ganaks were spared but the low caste Hindus viz. Koches, Keots, Doms and Haris were targeted. Many of them were put to death, some were deported to other places and the properties of many others were confiscated and they were compelled to eat the flesh of cows, swine and fowls (Gait, 1981 : 169). But it does not characterize him as a religious bigot because even after his conversion to Hinduism, he continued to follow Ahom rituals and customs. During the reign of his predecessors and successors, the Ahom court was dominated mainly by the Brahmins who put a bar on the consumption of beef for everyone (Barbarua, 2013 : 69). But under Gadadhar Singha's rule no such bar was there. In fact his favourite food was roasted calf with spring rice. The *kanri paiks* mostly consisted of low caste Hindus and tribal groups who had to render compulsory state services. The higher caste Hindus viz. Kayasthas, Kalitas and Ganaks were placed in the *chamua paiks* who were not liable to render compulsory state service. Thus when Jayadhvaj Singha exempted the *bhakats* from state services, a huge number of *kanri paiks* became *bhakats* just to forgo the state service. Majority of these *kanri paiks* who turned *bhakats* belonged to lower caste Hindus and newly Hinduized tribal groups who too were placed at the bottom of the Varna system. Gadadhar Singha perhaps persecuted mostly the low caste Hindus in order to disband the *bhakats* who were taking refuge in the *Sattras* to escape the hardships of the *paik* system. The *kanri paiks* who became *bhakats* were even forced to eat the flesh of swine, cattle and fowls. He possibly considered all the *kanri paiks* to be escapists who had taken refuge in the *Sattras* to forgo their compulsory duties to the state. He did not consider them to be sincerely dedicated to spiritual upliftment but just to ease, comfort and leisure. Thus it can be said that his decision was not guided by Brahmanical principles and one cannot narrow it down to religious bigotry which was considered by many scholars as the main cause for his persecution of the Vaishnava preachers. It was the threat posed to the Ahom system of governance which led Gadadhar Singha to persecute the *Gosains*. His decision of persecuting low caste Hindus was more politico-economic than religious as the low caste Hindus, including the newly Hinduized tribal groups, primarily constituted the *kanri paiks* and their flocking to the *Sattras* created great loss of man-power and inconvenience to the state system. Unlike his successors and many of his predecessors, Gadadhar Singha undertook these measures in order to save his kingdom and throne from being reduced to puppets in the hands of powerful Vaishnava *Gosains*.

After Gadadhar Singha, his son Rudra Singha (1696-1714) came to the throne. During the reign of Gadadhar Singha, in the course of the Vaishnava persecution many innocent people also fell victim to the harsh measures. When the king saw the repercussion of his ferocity on innocent people, he ordered the persecution to be stopped and a compensation to be made to the innocent victims. *Buranji Vivek Ratna* said that Gadadhar Singha suggested his son Rudra Singha to bring back all the Vaishnava *Gosains* and *Mahantas* who were deposed by him. Rudra Singha followed the words of his father and reinstated the Vaishnava *Gosains* and *Mahantas*. But being a religious bigot, he resorted to a new policy in order to curtail the power of the

Satradhikars – the head of the *Sattras*. He brought all the *Gosains* back and ordered the Brahmin *Gosains* to establish their headquarters at Majuli which was well within the reach of the Ahom state's supervision. As Majuli was near to the Ahom capital Garhgaon, the king Rudra Singha thought he would be able to keep an eye on the activities of the *Gosains*. The second important policy he adopted was the policy of 'divide and rule' in order to reduce the excessive powers accumulated by the *Sattras* and its *Gosains*. Through a meeting at Garhgaon he debarred the Sudra *Mahantas* from initiating the Brahmins (Bhuyan, 1968 : 32-33). He said there were no scriptures which gave authority to the Sudras to initiate Brahmins. The Brahmins who were formerly initiated by the Sudra *Mahantas* were again initiated by the Brahmin *Gosains*. The meeting was attended by both the Brahmins and the Sudra *Mahantas*. As both the groups were present at the meeting, the Sudra *Mahantas* felt humiliated by this new policy of king Rudra Singha and it triggered a clash between the two groups. The Sudra *Mahantas* grew furious not only with the Ahom monarchy but also with the Brahmins of both the Shaktas and the Vaishnavas since they took the side of the king. He even ordered the *Sattras* to follow the Brahminical ritual of idol worship. The *Gosains* of the Madhupuria and Kamalabaria *Sattras* had to bear severe punishments for not offering worship to the idols (Bhuyan, 1968 : 34). The king took another step of receiving the *Satradhikar* of the Auniati *Sattra* as his religious *guru* or preceptor (Sarma, 1975 : 10). During his reign the *Satradhikar* of the Auniati *Sattra* was the most influential of the Brahmin *Satradhikaras*. Perhaps he chose him as his *guru* to give the Brahmins an upper hand and to create a rift between the Brahmin and Sudra *Gosains* which would reduce the excessive power and supremacy of the institution of the *Satradhikar* and the *Sattras*.

Siva Singha, the successor of Rudra Singha, ascended the throne in 1714. The new king was a staunch Shakta and was highly influenced by the Brahmins. He was initiated into the faith by Krishnaram Bhattacharya or better known as Parvatia Gosain whom he put in charge of the Kamakhya temple. In the year 1722 the king Siva Singha was warned by the astrologers of his dethronement which they found out by calculating the position of the stars. Due to the prediction of the astrologers and following the advice of the *Parvatia Gosain*, Siva Singha surrendered his throne to three of his consorts viz. Phuleswari Devi, Ambika Devi and Sarveswari Devi. Queen Phuleswari Devi became the *Bar-Raja* or the 'chief-king' and the coins were jointly issued in her and Siva Singha's name.

Phuleswari Devi was a staunch Shakta. Originally she was a temple danseuse at a Shiva temple at Dergaon. King Siva Singha married her and gave her the name Pramatheswari. She was a staunch Shakta and was very much against the Vaishnavas. Her spiritual guide was Parvatia Gosain. After becoming the *Bar-Raja* or chief-king, she made an attempt to make Shaktism the religion of the state. The relationship between the state and the *Sattra* further deteriorated due to the heavy handedness of Phuleswari Devi. Once she invited a large number of Vaishnava *Gosains and Mahantas* from different *Sattras* to attend the Durga Puja held at a Shakta shrine. After the worship got over she forced the Sudra *Mahantas* to bow their heads before the Goddess and rubbed on their forehead the blood of the sacrificed animals. They were also

compelled to accept the *prasada* and *nirmali* (Bhuyan, 1962 : 71). Moreover, the *Gosains* who belonged to the Purusa *samhati* or Thakuria denominations were compelled to bow their heads before the *Satradhikars* of the Auniati and Garhmur *Sattra*. The Sudra *Gosains* and *Mahantas*, particularly those belonging to the Mayamara *Sattra*, the most radical of all the *Sattras*, felt humiliated. They considered this event a serious insult and they decided to take revenge when the right time comes. The insult of the Moamariyas by Phuleswari Devi was considered to be one of the major causes of the Moamariya rebellion which ultimately led to the downfall of the six hundred years old Ahom kingdom.

The next important ruler of the Ahom kingdom was Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769). Like his predecessors, Rajeswar Singha was also influenced by Brahmanical rituals and customs. He was initiated to the faith by one of the relatives of the Parvati Gosain namely Nati Gosain. During his reign the Ahom court was primarily dominated by the Brahmin priests. Kirti Chandra Barbarua, an Ahom official, who rose to prominence during Rajeswar Singha's reign, humiliated the Moamariya *Mahantas* on many occasions. Kirti Chandra was a disciple of the Dihing *Sattra* and he raised his *guru* of the Dihing *Sattra* to an eminent position at the Ahom court. He did this to isolate and counteract the growing influence and prominence of the Moamariya *Sattra*. Another incident happened during the reign of Rajeswar Singha following which Kirti Chandra Barbarua punished the Deka-Mahanta of the Moamariya *Sattra* (Bhuyan, 1974 : 204-207). His fault was that when king Rajeswar Singha was coming back from his pleasure trip to his capital, he stopped at the gate of the Moamariya *Sattra* for sometime. The Deka-Mahanta went there to greet the king. He could not take prior permission of the Barbarua before meeting the king as the latter's boat was yet to arrive at that place. Kirti Chandra Barbarua used this opportunity to punish the Deka-Mahanta and by doing this he once again insulted the Moamariyas.

Kirti Chandra Barbrua played an active role in the accession of Lakshmi Singha to the Ahom throne. Once he acquired the throne Lakshmi Singha banished the sons of the deceased king Rajeswar Singha. He also banished the wives of Rajeswar Singha who were sent adrift on a boat with no provision for any food items. When the boatman informed the Moamariya *Mahanta* regarding the sad condition of the wives of Rajeswar Singha, the *Mahanta* showed humanity and arranged food for their journey. This act of the Moamariya *Mahanta* infuriated Kirti Chandra and he poisoned the ears of king Lakshmi Singha by saying that the relationship of the *Mahanta* and his sons with the wives of Rajeswar Singha was doubtful. The repeated insult meted out to the Moamariyas made them rebellious and they became desperate for revenge. Again, in early October 1769, during the reign of Lakshmi Singha (1769-1780), Kirti Chandra Barbarua inflicted severe punishment on two of the important disciples of the Mayamara *Sattra* named Raha Moran and Nahar Khora. They were mercilessly beaten and Nahar Khora's ears were cut off at the order of Kirti Chandra. Along with the other tribes conquered by the Ahoms, the Morans were also given various works by the state and catching elephants was one of them. A majority of the Morans belonged to the Moamariya *Sattra*. In the discharge of their duty of bringing elephants for the state, the Barbarua charged them with bringing lean elephants and were punished (Maniram Dewan, *Buranji-Vivek-Ratna*, Vol III). These were considered as the

immediate causes of the Moamariya rebellion against the Ahom state. Therefore, it can be seen that the Ahom kings and their officials were themselves responsible for the violence that was to ensue during the Moamariya rebellion. The officials themselves created the grave state of affairs in which the Ahom state later got embroiled in.

By seeing the relationship between the Ahom state and the Vaishnava *Sattras*, it is quite evident that in the initial phase the Vaishnavas were persecuted immensely; then from the period of Chakradhvaj Singha (1663-1669) till the accession of Gadadhar Singha a peaceful relation was maintained as there was a quick succession of rulers; and then again during the rule of Tungkhungia Dynasty i.e. from Gadadhar Singha's reign till end of the Moamariya rebellion a selected section of the Vaishnava *Sattras* were patronised while others were persecuted.

In the initial phase i.e. till the reign of Sutyingpha or Naria Raja (1644-1648), the preceptors of the Vaishnava *Sattras* were highly persecuted. The reason for persecuting the Vaishnavas in this period was perhaps Ahom support towards Brahmanical religion. In order to discuss the reason behind the Ahom kings' acceptance of Shaktism and the subsequent patronization given to the Brahmins, it is necessary to have a brief glance of the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Ahoms before Hinduization. It is difficult to reach any conclusion regarding the major religion of the Ahoms. Before Hinduization the Ahom religious beliefs and practices were mainly influenced by the Buddhists of both the Hinayana and the Tantric creeds. They also had their own tribal tenets and faith. They partly followed animism, ancestor worship and along with it they had many Gods whom they worshipped (Maniram Dewan, Buranji-Vivek-Ratna, Vol III). There are various opinions regarding the religious beliefs and practices of the Ahoms. One scholar Hiteswar Barbarua argued that Ahom religious beliefs were influenced by the Buddhist doctrine which was based on non-violence (Barbarua, 2013 : 68). Another scholar Padmeswar Gogoi says that Ahoms were, no doubt, influenced by the Buddhist elements but their religious belief was based mainly on the supernatural powers. According to him the Ahoms performed sacrifices and their worship did not have any icon (Barbarua, 2013 : 389). Thus, it is difficult to label the religious beliefs and practices of the Ahoms.

What made the Ahoms accept Hinduism and patronize the Brahmins? When the Ahoms arrived in eastern Assam in the thirteenth century Shaktism was the most powerful and dominant religious tradition of the Brahmaputra valley. The caste Hindus such as Kayasthas, were mostly under the influence of Shaktism. Gradually the tribal groups were also coming under the influence of Shaktism possibly because many of their rituals and practices were similar like the performance of sacrifices, goddess worship etc. For the first two hundred years of the Ahom rule which was the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, the Ahoms continued to follow their own tribal religious beliefs and customs. But as their kingdom expanded and conquered new areas and kingdoms, a slow process of Hinduization started, though not on a mass scale.

There are some possible factors behind the Ahom state's initial acceptance and patronization of the Brahmanical religion. The Ahoms may not have had any religious zeal behind their acceptance of Hinduism and their patronization of the Brahmanical religion because even after accepting Hinduism, the Ahom rulers continued to follow

their own tribal customs and practices. At the time of arrival of the Ahoms a few religious sects which prevailed in the Brahmaputra valley were Shaktism or the Brahmanical religion, Shaivism, Tantric-Buddhism and a few centuries later Vaishnavism. The Brahmanical cult of Hinduism was the dominant religious tradition before the emergence of the Vaishnava movement. The Brahmins were the most influential people in the society. The caste Hindus and the tribes who were newly Hinduized mostly followed the Brahmanical religion. Thus initially, the Ahoms extended their patronage to this dominant social group perhaps with the view of utilizing the latter's influence among the indigenous population to strengthen their own position and establish their legitimacy in the newly conquered region. It had mutual benefits. On the one hand the Ahoms utilized Brahmanical influence over the indigenous people to establish their political superiority and on the other hand, the Brahmins had acquired more and more power and on receiving state support they got an opportunity to establish their position more firmly on the politico-religious front. The annexation and absorption of the Chutiya kingdom and the Bhuyan principalities, which were mostly Hinduized during that time, by the Ahoms also helped in the Hinduization process. According to S.K. Bhuyan after the annexation of the Chutiya kingdom the Ahoms entered in matrimonial relations with them which gave a fillip to the process. The inter-marriages between Ahoms and the Morans and Barahis also proved to be fruitful in this regard. Further the subjugation of the Hinduized kingdom of Koch on the West led the Ahoms to adopt Brahmanical customs and practices. The Hindu influence gained ground and accelerated after the consolidation of the Ahom kingdom. Thus annexation, absorption and expansion seem to be more significant in the Hinduization process of the Ahoms rather than religious zeal, particularly in the early period when the expansion and consolidation process was going on.

Another possible reason is that before the arrival of the Ahoms there were a number of indigenous rulers who had established their own kingdoms. The need to establish the Ahom monarchs' political superiority, legitimacy and the validity of their dynastic rule before the subjects, which consisted of both Hindus and non-Hindus alike, became closely related to the development of the Hinduization process. Therefore, the Divine Right Theory, which suggests a divine origin of the Ahoms, was important to establish their legitimacy among the indigenous people. The Brahmanical rites and rituals added substance to the Divine Right Theory which brought necessary support to the monarchy without the use of force, threat or coercion. The influence of the Brahmanical rituals and customs added to the dignity and decorum of the kingship with expensive and elaborate rituals, pomp and grandeur. This can be seen as a significant development in as much as it sought to project the image of the kingship to justify the despotic and absolute nature of the monarchy. The simple tribal customs of the Ahoms were gradually substituted by the grand customs of the Brahmins probably to justify their rule and legitimacy over the people. The adoption of the Hindu title 'Swargadeo' or 'Swarganarayan' along with Hindu names and accompanying rites brought about a fair degree of legitimacy to their rule.

Though initially the acceptance of the Brahmanical religion was a mere socio-political phenomenon, but from the reign of Bamuni Konwar alias Sudangpha (1397-1407) Brahminical religion entered the Ahom court. The influence of the Brahmins further extended during the reign of Suhungmung or Dihingia Raja (1497-1539). King Pratap Singha (1603-1641) was grateful to the Brahmins and patronised them immensely because it was said that when he was a prince he was possessed by some evil spirit and he was saved only when some Brahmanical rites were performed (Bhuyan, 1988 : 37; Barpujari, 2007 : 247). Therefore, he had a soft corner for the Brahmins and the Brahmanical rituals. All these occurrences, be it king Sudangpha's birth at the place of a Brahmin or king Pratap Singha's life saved by the performance of Brahmanical rites were accidental rather than religious. Therefore, it can be said that these accidental occurrences and the deliberate policy of the Ahoms along with their political zeal were responsible for patronizing the Brahmins. This opened the Ahom court to the Brahmins and they began to influence the affairs of the Ahom kingdom. Therefore, the Brahmins of the Ahom court played a great role in the persecution of the Vaishnavas during the early phase by poisoning the ears of the king.

Since our period of investigation is from the sixteenth century, i.e. after the division of the Vaishnava *sattras*, in this period heavy persecution of Vaishnavas took place especially during Pratap Singha's reign. This is the period when Vaishnavism was gaining ground in the society and accumulating huge followers. Unlike the later phases, the early persecution was meted out to the Brahmin *sattras* and the non-Brahmin *sattras* alike (Sarma, 1966, pp. 217-218). They targeted Vaishnavism as a whole rather than dividing them as Bamuniya and Mahapurusiya *sattras*.

From Jayadhvaj Singha's reign (1648-1663) formal initiation into Hinduism began. He accepted Vaishnavism and was initiated by a Vaishnava preceptor Niranjanadeva. This tradition continued upto the reign of Sulikpha alias Lora Raja (1679-1681). It is said that Jayadhvaj Singha patronised the Vaishnavas and from his period onwards Vaishnavas lived quite peacefully for sometime. But this was certainly not true because Jayadhvaj Singha patronised only those *sattras* which were established by him. He appointed Brahmins as the head of his newly established *sattras*. He tried the policy of 'divide and rule' as he patronised the *sattras* of the Brahmin pontiffs and persecuted the Mahapurusiya pontiffs. The *sattras* of Auniati, Dakhinapat, Kuruwabahi and Garmur were patronised by him. This created strife between the *sattras* of the royal camp and those outside the royal favours.

This was also a period when the Ahom kingdom was under a serious external threat from the Mughals. The Vaishnava *Sattras* had by now established a firm ground among the people. Therefore, it is quite obvious that the Ahom monarchs did not want to enter into any internal disturbances by hurting the sentiments of the Vaishnavas as it would have put them into more trouble. Following this they tried to create a division among the Vaishnava *Sattras* in order to break their power. Thus although this period from Jayadhvaj Singha to Sulikpha alias Lora Raja was considered to be a period of peace and patronization for the Vaishnavas, it was only the Bamuniya division which gained a permanent foothold in the Ahom court much to the disadvantage of the other *Sattras* of the non-Brahmin order.

The hostility with the Mughals reached its zenith during the time of Jayadhvaj Singha and it ended during Udayaditya Singha's reign. However, a portion of western Assam was still under the control of the Mughals even during Udayaditya's reign. It was Gadadhar Singha who finally drove the Mughals out of the whole of Assam. Thus the reason behind the peaceful living of Vaishnava preachers from the reign of Ramadhvaj Singha (1672-1674) to Sulikpha Lora Raja (1679-1681) needs to be analysed. There was no record of Vaishnava persecution during this period. This is perhaps because it was a period of internal turmoil, a period where the reign of the kings was brief and most of them were puppets in the hands of their ministers. The inner turmoil and the instability of the government possibly kept the monarchs away from any clash with the Vaishnava preachers.

During the seventeenth century the Ahom rulers and nobles who patronised the Vaishnavas made lavish grants to the *Sattras* and the *Gosains*. As a result of the huge grants made by the king and the nobility, the *Sattras* and *Gosains* accumulated massive wealth. Many of the rulers and important officials of the Ahom ruling class became their disciples and as a result the powerful *Gosains* yielded much political clout. Powerful *Sattras* like Auniati and Dakhinapat also began to interfere in the state activities. By the time Gadadhar Singha came to the throne in 1681 A.D., the *Sattras* had acquired the status of a 'state within a state'. Gadadhar Singha therefore resorted to harsh measures to curb the influence of the powerful Vaishnava *Gosains* and stop them from interfering in the affairs of the Ahom court. Though Gadadhar Singha was infamous for his persecution of the Vaishnava preachers, religion had little role to play in it. He considered taking those steps as a political exigency at the time.

However Gadadhar Singha's successors were the followers of Shaktism and patronised Brahmins. From the reign of Siva Singha the situation further deteriorated. The religious bigotry of these rulers led them to commit atrocities on the Vaishnava monks. Gadadhar Singha in his reign made efforts to keep religion and state affairs separate but the same was not the case with the later rulers. In order to give the Shaktas an upper hand they harassed the non-Brahmin Vaishnavas and insulted them on many occasions. Their chief concern was not to favour the Bamuniya *Sattras* and persecute the non-Brahmin *Sattras*, rather they attempted to impose Brahmanical rituals and practices on all of them so that indirectly they could be brought under the influence of the state.

Thus, it can be said that the relationship between the Ahom state and the *Sattras* was not a smooth one. Their relationship was guided not merely by religious bigotry or political rivalry. The relationship between the state and the *Sattra*, particularly after the division of the *Sattras* into four orders, was influenced by various factors, sometimes it was the socio-political exigencies of the rulers; sometimes the prevalent external threat and sometimes the internal turmoil and politics of the Ahom court. Political and economic threat from the *Sattras* was one of the major factors which shaped their relation particularly in the period of the Tungkhungia rulers. The allegiance of the Ahom rulers and nobles towards the Brahmins and the latter's interference in the state affairs too played an active part in shaping the relationship

between the Ahom state and the *Sattras* in the second half of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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