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TAI-AHOM RELIGION AND CUSTOMS

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Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi

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INTRODUCTION

Assam is a land of remarkable variety, not only geographically, but also from the point of view of ethnology. The appellation, 'An anthropological museum', is, therefore, justly applicable to this land of variegated racial and cultural patterns. A true student of the history of Assam, therefore, must have adequate knowledge, not only of the political history of Assam, but also of the various races and tribes with their distinctive cultural heritage and the inevitable interaction and synthesis thereof.

The present book, "Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs" by an eminent scholar, will definitely bring into focus much hitherto unknown or less known information regarding an important segment and constituent of Assamese culture, namely, the religious beliefs and various customs and rituals of the Tai-Ahoms. The Ahom rulers, before being converted into Hinduism, had their own religious practices and customs, which are even now preserved among only a limited section. The author has taken pains to collect data from field studies, besides depending on certain manuscripts. The book also throws valuable light on the history of the Mayamarias. An interesting aspect of the book is that Dr. Gogoi has attempted an assessment of the impact of Hinduism on the original Tai-Ahom culture.

We firmly believe that the book will prove to be a valuable supplement to anyone's study of the comprehensive history of Assamese culture.

We shall deem our pains amply rewarded if the book receives its due appreciation from scholars as well as the general readers.

Gauhati
July 20, 1976

C. P. Saikia

PREFACE

The book entitled **Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs** is a collection of ten research papers written during my tenure as a retired teacher at the University of Gauhati from March 1971 to March 1973 under the University Grants Commission's Scheme of 'Utilization of services of retired teachers'. Materials for the subjects dealt with in the book were drawn partly from rare literary sources and mostly from field studies for which travel grants were provided by the U. G. C. The Phrālung or Phurālung worship and the Omphā Puja, Saiphā Puja and Rik-khan ceremony were characteristic of the Tai-Ahoms. The Tai-Ahom marriage and burial customs have been published here for the first time in fuller detail. For the latter, I am indebted to Shri Tolan Chandra Saikia of Jorhat. The Ahom and Assamese puthis (manuscripts), as are available, give but imperfect accounts of the Ahom marriage system called Caklang. Little is known to the world about the religious beliefs and practices of the Māyāmarīyās. In this book for the first time a paper dealing with them is included. Hinduism with its sectarian forms, as adopted in Assam by the Ahom rulers, had tremendous effects on the administration and the Ahom society with lessons to be drawn from it.

I am very thankful to the Publication Board, Assam, for undertaking to bring to light these research papers in the form of a book by buying up their copyright.

P. Gogoi

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CHAPTER I

AHOM COSMOGONY

The Tai-Ahom religion is based on certain fundamental beliefs in supernatural powers. First, these people believed in an omnipotent God (*phā-tu-ching*). Secondly, they also believed in an hierarchy of gods that owe their origin to the Great God. They were not atheists in any sense of the term. They worshipped not only these various gods with elaborate ceremony, they worshipped even their ancestors with great devotion.

The Tai-Ahoms or, in short, the Ahoms have their own theory of creation of the world handed down from their ancestors and recorded in their literature. The theory states that "in the beginning there were no gods and men. The world was void and was surrounded by the water of the ocean. There were no air, no animals, no land, no rulers, no countries and no living beings. Also the sun, the moon and the stars did not exist. There was neither the earth nor the heaven. There was only one omnipotent being the Great God." (See *Ahom Buranji*, P. 1) It may be noted that the Hindu Vedic Nasadiya Hymn as translated by Max Müller said similar things describing the condition before the beginning of the creation. It says, for example, that "There was then neither what is nor what is not, there was no sky, nor the heaven which is beyond. What covered? where was it, and in whose shelter? Was the water the deep abyss (in which it lay)? Darkness there was, in the beginning all this was a sea without light etc." (reproduced in Radhakrishnan's *Indian Philosophy*, volume one, pp. 100-1.)

The Tai-Ahom story further says—"God suddenly opened His eyes and could see nothing attractive and charming. He created a deity, known as Hkun-theu-Hkām, from His breast,.....A lotus plant with its flower (*mu māk*)^o issued forth from His (Hkum-theu-Hkām's) navel. Then a crab was created. After this, a tortoise was created. He also created a large serpent which encircled the tortoise. The serpent had eight hoods which he spread to eight directions. Then he made a large white elephant with long tusks. Another a white mountain was made in the north. Another mountain was created

in the south. Then pillars were placed on the tops of the mountains. A rope was made, which was bound fast to the pillars on the mountains (the *Merus*). Then a pair of large goldtinted spiders (*mo Kao*) was created. The spiders, as they floated in the sky, let fall their excrement, out of which the earth arose."

When God was alone and the world was void it was 'surrounded by the water of the ocean.' This Tai-Ahom description of the creation has essential similarity with Hindu cosmogonical processes. The primal flood theory of the Tai-Ahoms has its parallel both in Hindu and Christian mythology. On the dissolution (*pralaya*) of the world all material objects disappear and then the God Almighty, being alone, wills a new creation. The Puranic descriptions of the processes of creation are substantially the same though in details they vary between themselves and the Tai-Ahom account appears as if it is another Puranic description. The three elements, namely the spider, the crab (*pu*) and the eight-hooded serpent unlike the thousand-hooded Ananta or six-hooded Ananta (Vāsuki) of the Hindu Purāṇas, appear to be a novelty in the Ahom Cosmogony.

God created the first deity called Hkun-Theu-Hkām (Hkun-man, theu-beautiful, Hkām-gold i. e. a beautiful being of human form whose colour was like gold) from his breast. In the Tai-Ahom account it is said that God had originally no shape, but for creation he took shape. Whether he appeared in human form is not stated in the text. Since He created the first being from his breast he may be supposed to have assumed a human form. Hkun-theu-Hkām is comparable to the first Purāṇic god Nārāyaṇa, for it was from the navel of Hkun-Theu-Hkām that a lotus plant issued forth just as in the Hindu account such a lotus plant issued forth from the navel of Nārāyaṇa (He was Mahāviṣṇu, 'who, as Hiranyagarbha, desired creation and immediately from his navel arose a lotus plant with four-faced Brahmā on it through whom the act of creation was started) with Brahmā sitting on the lotus flower. In the Tai-Ahom account of creation there is no mention of any deity sitting on the lotus flower. The spiders mentioned, it is said, 'put eight pillars in eight corners of the earth'.

The above story of the beginning of creation can also be compared with that given in the Bible (vide *Genesis*) where it is said that 'the earth was without form and void; darkness was upon the face of the deep.....And God said, let there be light and there was light.....Let there be firmament; and divided the waters which were under the firmament. And God called the firmament Heaven, Then God created the Earth, and it was followed by the creation of all

kinds of grass and plant life, varieties of fish in the waters, beasts and birds and at the end the man in the image of God. 'On the seventh day God ended his work of creation.' Here in the Christian mythology there is no particular mention of the lotus, the crab, the spiders and the Serpent or Ananta. The emphasis on the things created and the nature and order of creation are different in the three systems, but the underlying principle is the same. It may be safely assumed that these different peoples developed their separate culturars and civilizations independently of one another in anciant times in different part of the globe but yet in certâin respects there was common thinking and common way of reasoning. This is evident with regard to the origins of creation. From the linguistic point of view no word or expression or proper name of Sanskrit origin can be traced in the ancient literature of the Ahoms, but words and names of Boḍo and Assamese origin entered their chronicles of the later mediaeval period in Assam when a kind of cultural fusion began from their common neighbourhood with other peoples.

In the Tai-Ahom account God created Hkun-Theu-Hkâm from His breast but he then created a Goddess for his wife. From God and Goddess (*Song-râ*-i.e, pair) as parents were born four golden eggs. One Thaolung sprinkled ambrosia (*nyâ pulok*) on the eggs (*lon Hkâm*) in consequence of which the letter burst and four beings came out. It is probably due to their birth being attributed to the effect of ambrosia that they and their descendant, the Tai, came to be regarded as a race of gods. That ambrosia (*âmṛta*) immortalizes is also the Hindu belief.

These four sons of God were called according to seniority of birth—

1. Phâ-shâng-din-khâm-neyeu,
2. Sheng-châ-phâ-khâm,
3. Sheng-kâm-phâ, and
4. Ngi-ngâo-khâm or Phu-râ.

Phâ-shâng-din-khâm-neyeu was made the ruler of the earth. Sheng-châ-phâ-phâ-khâm was made the master of eight lakhs of sea serpents. Sheng-kâm-phâ, the third son, was put in charge eighty thousand thunders or stones (*phâ*). The fourth and the youngest son Ngi-ngâo-khâm was asked to remain with God himself to help him in the creation of the world.

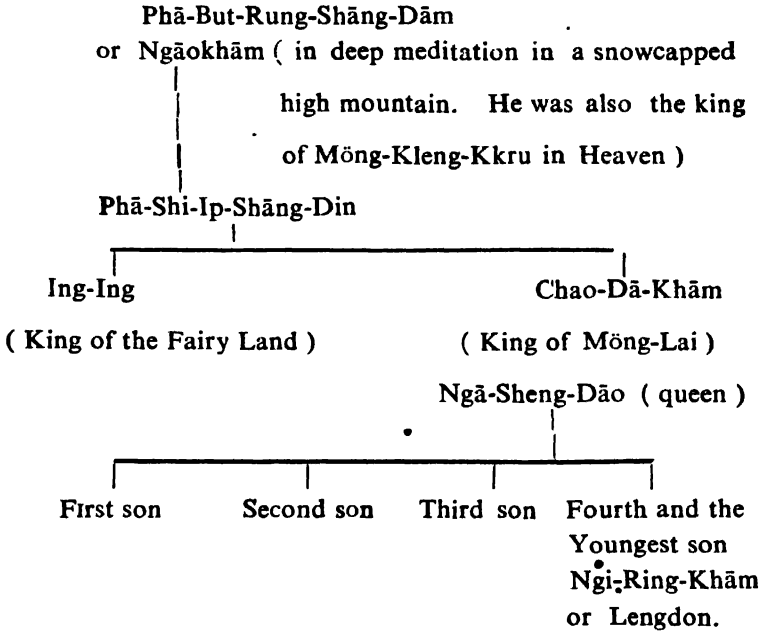
Another name of Ngi-Ngâo, Khâm was Phu-Râ. Having thus instructed his sons God rose up or disappeared. Phu-Râ worship with great illumination is in vogue to-day among the Ahoms.

It is narrated that the third son Sheng-kām-phā acted against God and met with death and became an evil spirit. His son Sheng-Kā-Phā became king, but after death became a household deity. This deity is worshipped to this day as a benign household god particularly by the non-Hindu section of the Tai in Assam. This god is supposed to look after the welfare of the household.

God's descendants were ruling in the world down while God Himself resided in the 'highest Heaven.' God as immanent or indwelling spirit in all objects of the phenomenal world is not indicated in the Ahom conception of God, nor was it perhaps later developed in their system by their priests and scholars. According to Ahom cosmogony in the beginning God was alone and "remained suspended in the sky like a swarm of bees in a hive." He had no head and no legs to walk. He had no mouth to speak. He resembled a lump of flesh hanging in the sky. Then God thought of changing His shape." He took a long time to change, which implies a course of evolution till his eyes were opened. (*Ahom Buranji*, p. 1). The description here is interesting and comparable to the nebular hypothesis of Laplace regarding the creation of the solar system.

The Tai-Ahom conceptions of Heaven and Earth governed their outlook in their association with other peoples and the story goes that Hkun-Lōng and Hkun-Lai, both brothers, and grand-sons of Lengdon, were sent down by Lengdon himself, the Lord of Heaven (Indra of the Assamese *Buranjis*) to found his dynasty in the lower countries. (*Ahom Buranji*, p. 24). Lengdon himself was ruling in Heaven, the country of the gods (mōng phi). There eight lakhs of gods paid him homage. (*ibid* P.5). It appears that the Tai were regarded as heaven-born and hence gods who distinguished themselves from other races of people of the earth. As the ruler of Heaven Lengdon was identified with the Vedic God Indra by the Hindus and the rulers of his dynasty were called Indra-varṁśī (some times Deva varṁśī or of Deosons). Perhaps the only Indravamśī dynasty in India of the present day was that of the Tai-Ahoms in Assam, other Indian dynasties being Sūryya or Candravamśī.

Lengdon was probably the title of the Ruler of Heaven. One Ngi-ring-khām or Sairepā was called Lengdon who was in possession of ambrosia (Tai: *Nhā-Pulak*) by taking which the gods of Heaven became immortal and Heaven was called the land of immortals (Amarāvati or Amarāpur in Hindu mythology). Lengdon was also the 'Lord of eight lakhs of thunders and lightnings', (see for Lengdon and his genealogy *A. B.* pp. 3-4). Lengdon's genealogy is described as—



It is because of the attributes mentioned that Lengdon is called by the Hindus Indra.

Some of the gods and goddesses of the Tai-Ahom pantheon may be mentioned here and it would be interesting to note their corresponding Hindu names given by the Hindu priesthood. Thus,

<i>Tai-Ahom</i>	<i>Hindu</i>
Lāngkuri	Śiva
Phā-Pin-Bet	Viṣṇu
Bān	Sūryya
Den	Candra
Fāi	Agni
Āi-Jāng-Nāo	Kuvera
Phyun	Vāruṇa
Cām-Chung	Jama
Āi-Ā-Nāng	Lakṣmī
Jā-Shing-Phā	Saraswatī

<i>Tai-Ahom</i>	<i>Hindu</i>
Chāng-Dām	Brahmā
Chāng.-Dām or Lengdon	Indra
Chāng-Pau	Manu
Pet Ngek	Aṣṭa Nāg
Phri-Nat-Yao	Durgā
Ang-Kā	Mangal
Cha-Kia	Śukra
Tyani	Śani
Klen-Dek	Rāhu
Klen-Bān	Ketu
Lao-Khri	Viśvakarmā
Lung-Sāi-Net	Vāyu
Leng-Sueng	Lord of light, probably the Sun ^e , or Sūryya
Pu-Phi-Shu	Forest god.

So far we have mentioned the gods in Heaven as created by God, As for the creation of mankind on earth the Tai-Ahom account is unique. It is said that in the year *Lākni Kāmut* the earth substance, which was too soft and loose, was made sufficiently hard by the action of the Sun for cultivation. The first seed that was grown on it was that of a gourd. In the same year the gourd, which had developed in the meantime, was burst open by the *Vajra* of Ai-Phālān, the eldest son of Lengdon, and numerous human beings and other creatures came out of it.

CHAPTER II

AHOM DEITIES

The Ahom people of Assam were not image-worshippers in their own religion. They had no icons of the gods and goddesses named in their sacred books. But only the Ahom royal family was in exclusive possession of two idols called Chum and Sheng which were carefully preserved as the tutelary deities of the king. While sending down from Heven¹ the two princes, Hkūn-Lōng and Hkum-Lai, to rule on earth Lengdon,² the Lord of Heven, said 'I give you Chumph-rārungrung-Shengmung. You should greet the gods touching the ground with your head.'³ Chum and Sheng are called Somdeo and Shengdeo in the Assamese accounts. They were deities (phrā) in bright colour (rung) presiding over the country or kingdom (mung or mōng). Hence it can be possessed only by the ruling king responsible for the country or kingdom. Of the two deities the image of Chnmphrā rungrung is in the shape of a heron'⁴ Chumdeo can give unlimited wealth and power and its possession should be maintained with extreme secrecy. Chumdeo was 'an image of God'. 'It was in a small box placed on a gold seat.'

"In the days of yore, Phālāibet (phā or phrā : God, lai stout, Bet : adorned) sent down the idols with Phā-but-rung-Shāng-dām. With the power of the idols, Shāngdām proved a successful ruler. He worshipped the idols, according to rules. Now 'I (Lengdon) give you (Hkun-Lōng and Hkun-Lāi)' again the idols, You will be able to rule the countries well by worshipping the deities. You should see *Chumphā-rungmung* once a year being attired in godly dress'.⁵ It is very interesting to note that Ney Elias has thrown further light on Chum and Sheng by

1. Said to be T'ien (Yunnān) in South-west China according to modern interpretation. Being a descendant of the Lord of Heaven the first Ahom king and his dynastic rulers were called Swargadevas in Assam by the Hindus.

2. Identified with Indra by the Hindus.

3. *Ahom Buranji* (A. B.) by G. G. Barua, p. 15.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 15. According to one Sanskrit-scholar P. N. Vidya vinod it is a Tāntric Yantra. See *Ahom Buranji* (A. B.) by G. G. Barua (Assam Administration, 1930). P. 8.

5. *Ibid.*, P. 13. see also for its qualities *Deodhāi Assam Buranji* (D. H. A. S., 1932), p. 208.

his researches in the Burmese-Shan sources. According to him the two images were those of Hkun-Lung and Hkun-Lai's ancestors. Hkun-Lung (or Hkun-Lu) packed the two images, 'one male called Sung and one female called Seng, into a box, and started towards the west, carrying the box upon his head.'⁶ But in Ahom literature greater importance is attached to god Chum. The rulers of the Ahom dynasty believed that by virtue of this precious possession they were able to rule with success and glory. Chumphā or Chum-deo (from Sans. *Deva* : god) is supposed to possess certain mystic powers. A parallel is the 'golden cat' of the neighbouring Chutiya kings who preserved it is a sacred object and source of power, prosperity and glory. It was a gift of Kuvera. The Chutiya king would part with everything else but not with the golden cat.

Chumphārungmung, which possesses the shape of a heron, cannot be indentified with any known deity. It may well be the figure of a dragon which was an emblem and an object of worship both in ancient China and Burma. The Sheng may be an accompanying female dradon. No definite identification is possible. *Chumphā* used to be installed in a separate temple.

Hindu priests and Pandits in Assam identify some of the Tai-Ahom gods and goddesses with those of the Hindus. Mention may be made of some of the important indentifications as noted below—

<i>Tai-Ahom</i>	<i>Hindu.</i>
Lengdon	Indra
Lāngkuri	Śiva
Phā-Pin-Bet	Viṣṇu
Chāng-Dām	Brahmā
Bān	Sūryya
Dēn	Candra
Fāi	Agni
Āi-jāng-Nāo	Kuvera
Āi-Ā-Nāng	Lakshmī
Jā(yā)-Shing-Phā	Sarasvatī
Lao-Khri	Viśvakarmā

This is enough to mention these few gods and goddesses though there are others, so indentified. It may also be noted that there is no etymological or phonetical similarity in any degree between the corresponding names of the two sides.

6. *Gazeteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States.* (Rangoon. 1900), part I-vol. I, p. 219.

The Vedic and Purāṇic gods and goddesses are represented by material images which the Hindus worship. During the early Vedic period the mighty forces of nature were invoked in hymns, but at a later period with the growth of the sculptural art first crude and later fine icons and statuettes were cut out from stones or made of metals. The Ahoms invoked supernatural powers, formless spirits, *Nats* as they are called by the Burmese, with rice, eggs, flowers and sometimes animal sacrifices. They produced art and architecture, but no icons of gods for the purpose of worship.

Originally when Hkun-Lōng and Hkun-Lai were sent down from Heaven by Lengdon to rule over a country called Mōng-ri Mōng-rām⁷ on earth, Chum-deo was handed to the elder Prince Hkun-Lōng (or Hkun-Lu as the Shans and perhaps also the Chinese pronounce it) to be worshipped every day and Sheng-deo to Hkun Lai. On two auspicious occasions every year, namely, one in the month of Māgh (*Din Shām*, January-February), and the other in the month of Chaitra (*Din hā*, March-April), particularly the last day of *Chaitra*, the deities were to be taken out of the casket by the king himself and washed adding milk, scents and gāthian (a kind of fragrant root). The washing is a ceremonial performance the water of which being thus sanctified is sprinkled over the persons assembled. The ceremony should be performed by the king dressed in clean white clothes. After the washing is over the king should worship the deities with appropriate offerings and look at them with devotion and put them back into the casket. Lengdon also said he would watch all this from Heaven and eight lakh (eight hundred thousand) gods would descend to the earth. ⁸

The great king Hsō-kā-Hpā., the founder of the Tai-Ahom Dynasty in the Brahmaputra Valley (later Assam) while marching down with an expeditionary force across the Patkai, brought with him Chumphā-rung Shengmung (Chumdeo-Shengdeo).⁹ Assam was called by the Tai-Ahoms Mōng-Dun or rather Mōng-Dun-Hsun-Hkām which means in Sanskrit *Suvarṇabhūmi* or a land of golden harvest, that is, a rich agricultural land. According to some Chronicles *Chumdeo* was given to Hsō-kā-Hpā

7. Mōng-ri Mōng-rām or Mōng-hi Mong-hām as some Tai clans pronounce it. Probably Lengdon directed them to Mong-teu and Mong-tām. lower Countries, which can not be indentified, See *A. B. P.* 12.

8. Kasinath Tamuli Phukan : *Assam Buranji* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 2.

9. *A. B.*, p. 25. Original Chum-Sheng given to Hsō-kā-Hpā was replaced by stone-made ones. See *Doodhai Assam Buranji* (D. H.A.S., 1932), p. 89.

by his grand-mother at the time of his departure from Mōng-Mao in Yün-nān where he had been brought up and of which he was to become king, the ruling king being childless. But that king's wife later conceived and delivered a child and Hsö-kā-Hpā left the capital.

In some other Assamese chronicles Hsö-kā-Hpā is said to have brought the idols Chumpā and Shengmung from the Narā country Mogaung. At any rate Hsö-kā-Hpā got it from his ancestors.

Lengdon further advised Hkun-Lōng and Hkun-Lai at the time of transferring to them the deities *Chumphārungshengmōng*, the *vigrahas* in the Hindu sense, in these words - 'you will never leave *Chumphārungshengmōng*, you must be careful not to let them (i. e. chum and sheng) fall to the ground. You will then be endowed with long life. No king will disobey you. I, Lengdon, the Lord of thunder, send you both (i.e. Hkun-Lōng and Hkun-Lai). We all the gods bless you'¹⁰

The *Chumphā* or *Chumdeo* used to be installed by the Ahom monarchs in a specially made house or temple and carefully guarded ; for, it cannot be parted with under the instructions of Lengdon, the original giver. When king Hsö-kā-Hpā, a few years before his conquest of Eastern Assam, then called Saumār, had led an expedition from Mōng-Mit Kupklingdāo, his original kingdom, in upper Burma to the Chutiya country with Sadiya as the central city, 'he took with him a Kachāri and put him in charge of the house of Chum and Sheng (*ren Chumsheng*).'¹¹ That Kachāri was named *Chumshiri* which was merely an official designation. Sometimes, only *Somdeo* (*Chumphārungmōng*) is mentioned implying thereby the pre-eminence of *Somdeo* (*Chumphā*).

The image *Chumphā* is indispensable for the purpose of coronation of the Ahom Kings. The usual practice for the king is to fetch the casket containing *Chum-Sheng* from the temple of *Chum-Sheng* and suspend the idol of *Chumphā* over the chest from his neck during the coronation ceremonies. After seven days of merriment and feasting by the people in connection with the coronation the casket of *Chum-Sheng* is put back by the king in the temple. On a particular auspicious day after the celebrations of coronation the king proceeds to perform the ceremony of planting an *āobar* or *āyu baḍ*, that is, a sapling of a banian tree (in Assamese *baḍ gach*, which is said to be *āobar* or better *āobaḍ*, *Ficus Indica* i. e. Indian fig tree) at a selected place on the Charaideo hill, Suffry or the hill Daikāorang in the region of Suffry. *āobaḍ* or *āyubaḍ*

10. A. B. p. 12

11. Op. cit., 36.

is symbolic of long life. The king plants it for the good and long life of all in the country. He also plants a peepul tree (Sans. *Aśvattha* or bo-tree or *Ficus Religiosa*). It also represents long life.

Sir Edward Gait has brought to our notice in his *A History of Assam* (second Edition. p. 74 f. n.) that 'the Someo is said to have been still in the possession of (the Ahom Prince) Purandar Singh when he took refuge in Bengal in 1819. In 1912 Colonel P. R. Gurdon C.S.I. found with his descendant Chandra Nārāyaṇ Singh of Jorhat a metal plaque, oblong in shape, but rounded at the top, measuring about $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches and half an inch thick, which was said to have been used as a pedestal for the Somdeo. There was a hole at the upper end, by means of which it was said to have been suspended from the neck of the Ahom kings at the time of their coronation ceremony. Colonel Gurdon was informed that the Somdeo was a jewel set in a cylinder, and that it was sold in Calcutta by a nephew of Purandar Singh when in financial difficulties. A similar fate, he was told, befell a set of seven gold caskets, one inside the other, in which the Somdeo and plaque were formerly kept. The plaque bears on its back, front and sides Chinese inscriptions, viz. on the front, "Letters patent dated the fifth year of Yung Lo" (1408 A.D.): on the back, "By command of his Imperial Majesty, the President of the Board compares both halves"; on the left side, "Be faithful" and on the right side, "Let the rescript have effect, The Royal Commission for conciliation Timasa."

Young *Lo mentioned in the above note was the greatest Emperor of the Ming Dynasty of China who ruled from A. D. 1403 to 1424. It is clear from the history of the Ahoms that no king of the Ahom dynasty was ever tributary to China. Modern scholars identify Ti-ma-sa with Chieng-Mai in northern Thailand (Old Siam) which was tributary to China in the fifteenth century. Dimāchā of the Boḍos or Tai-Ahom form Ti-mi-chā or Ti-mā-chā of Assam cannot be meant in this connection. Hence the plaque discovered at Jorhat with Chinese inscriptions cannot be the pedestal for *Somdeo*. It may at most be a Chinese Imperial Seal which is compared with the other half preserved at the Imperial court for identification of the tribute-bearer. There was no other corroborative evidence than the oral statement of the person who possessed the plaque which was a relic bearing a rescript signifying subordination to China. The question of the plaque should therefore be a matter of separate investigation. But it is entirely unconnected with the sacred *Chumphārungshengmōng* of the Ahom kings which was an object of veneration and hence carefully preserved in a temple (Assamese-*deo-ghar* or house of god).

The Tai-Ahom people in general had a number of gods or spirits or *nats* whom they worshipped and propitiated for their protection, general welfare and cure from illness and evils. They believed that in this world of phenomena all visible objects have invisible spirits or gods presiding over them. Thus the forests, the rivers, the hills, the paddy fields and even the households had their presiding deities. For instance, the presiding deity of the forests is called Pu-Phi-Shu. Lengdon, the highest god and the forefather of the Ahom dynasty, addressing Hkun-Löng, the elder prince, at the investiture ceremony in Heaven just before the departure of the two princes, Hkun-Löng and Hkun-Lai, for the down country on earth, said "I send down Pu-Phi-Shu also there. He is directed to dwell in a large tree and reign in the forest. The tree is known as Tun-rung-rāi (peepul or bo-tree. Sans. *asvattha bṛkṣa*, in Assamese *ānhat gach*, *Ficus Religiosa*) of which Pu-Phi-Shu is the lord. This god is worshipped by all the people and propitiated with the sacrifice of buffaloes for protecting them from evils.¹²

Lengdon (Hitdu Indra) was the principal god of the Ahom rulers. The worship of Lengdon and other gods together was a state ceremony performed annually with sacrifices of many varieties of animals including birds and lizards. It was celebrated as *Umphā Puja* (*Um* consecration, *phā* or *Phrā* gods). It is still in vogue at Āmlakhi Rangāgarāh on the bank of the Disāng near Lākowā in the Upper Assam district of Sibsāgar. Now this *Puja* is held not annually but at intervals of some five years in a miniature form. It is said that the sacrificial altar was originally at Charāideo, King Hso-Kā-Hpā's capital in the early thirteenth century A. D. It was later transferred to Rangāgarāh. The place is called Rangāgarāh (*rangā* red, *garāh* bank) because of the red ochrous colour of the river bank soils about this place. Colonel P. R. Gurdon, who once attended the sacrificial performance of the *Umphā Puja*, left a graphic description of it.

There was another worship, that of Shāi-Phā Phreu-Lungngām, with, it is said, blood offerings. It is no longer in vogue. It is also said that Shāi-Phā is propitiated along with other gods at the grand *Umphā Puja*. Ancestor worship is another feature of the Ahom religion. Ancestors, the Ahoms believe, become gods in Heaven after their death and watch their descendants on earth.

Over and above Lengdon, Jāshing-Phā and Lao-Khri (Mo-Sheng Phā Lāo Khri in full) a number of other deities are adored by the Ahoms

and they are 1. Phā-tu-ching, the highest-being of Heaven or God Almighty, 2. Khun-theu-Khān, 3. Khrāi-Phā-rung-Khām, 4. Lengdon, who was the younger son of Dākhām, to be distinguished from Lengdon, the Lord of Heaven, 5. Phā-but-rum-Shāng-dām, 6. Phā-shi-ip-shāng-deng and 7. Phurā-Tārā or its Burmese form Burā or Bhurā meaning the Buddha (or rather Bodhi-sattva) and his female counterpart Tārā. Phurā worship is still performed as *Phurā-lōng Puja* among the Ahoms with great illumination and vegetarian offerings. No animals are sacrificed at the *Phurā-lōng-Puja* : It is related to a Buddhist jātaka story. The Ahoms also worship the household deity making a post in corner of the main house the centre of worship.

There was another state ceremony called *Rik-Khan* (*Rik* call, *Khan* life, longevity or more properly *Rik-Khan Mōng-Khan* performed by the Ahom kings after a victory was won against enemies in wars and great battles. It is a ceremony of invoking higher powers to grant long life to the king and the country. It is also accompanied with victory celebrations with drums, music and jubilation. Another victory celebration is *Sne-fu-Sne-dām*.

CHAPTER III

THE AHOMS' CHANGE OF RELIGION

OLD RELIGION

As to the nature of the Tai-Ahoms' own racial religion an idea can be had from the following account given in the ancient Ahom chronicles.

The Tai-Ahom line of kings ruling in the Brahmaputra valley descended from Khun-lōng, a grandson of Lengdon, the Lord of Heaven¹ and a son of Sengtaonyeu Kāiphā Thenkhām who was a son of Chao Dākhām, the king of Mōng-Lāi.² Thenkhām was the nephew of Lengdon.³

Among the gods and goddesses of the Tai-Ahoms the names of Lengdon, Thenkām, Yāshingphā⁴ and Lāokhri⁵ are specially mentioned in their old Chronicles. They used to hold their Council meetings in Heaven for making decisions on important issues. At the time of sending down Khun-lōng and Khun-lāi to rule over the countries on earth in the sixth century A.D.⁶ they said—

“We now wish to send you down. We all bless you. At the end of a year you worship us by sacrificing an elephant. Next year worship us by killing a cow and a buffalo. We wish you to be undisputed kings.”⁷

But these grand ceremonies of worship with animal sacrifices were performed without any images of gods or goddesses before them. Yet they knew whom they were worshipping. It might be that worship through images did not develop among the Tai-Ahoms. There is no

1. Heaven is here Tien, a part of Yun-nān in South-West China.

2. See *Ahom-Assamese-English Dictionary* compiled by G. C. Barua from original Ahom works (Assam Administration, 1920), p. 4.

3. *Ahom Buranji* by G. C. Barua (Assam Administration, 1930), pp. 8, 9.

4. Corresponding to Hindu Saraswati.

5. Corresponding to Hindu Viśvakarmā who was also the heavenly poet.

6. The descent of Khun-Lōng and Khun-Lai is ascertained by scholars like J. N. Cushing and Ney Elias to be in the 6th century A. D.

7. *Ahom Buranji* by G. C. Barua, P. 74 '6

mention of images in the literature of the race. Secondly, animals mentioned for sacrifice were generally large ones like elephants, cows and buffaloes, though small ones of many domestic and wild varieties were also sacrificed.

The Tai-Ahoms like any other advanced race had a theology of their own. They had the conception of "one omnipotent being, the Great God" or *Phā-Tu-Ching*⁸ (*Phā* : heaven *tu* : a being, *ching* : highest) whom they called also *Phā-Lāi-Bet*,⁹ who created the whole world. He is supposed to be the God of gods and men and other creatures. He does not come to participate in Council meetings in Heaven which is terrestrial rather than celestial in the Epic or Puranic sense of the Hindus. The Tai were the heaven-born persons and hence gods.¹⁰ Lengdon said to *Khun-lōng* and *Khun-lai* - 'I shall send down eight lakhs of gods who will cut down all the enemies etc.'¹¹ The gods mentioned here were no other than the Tai and the non-Tai were regarded as slaves (*khā*).¹²

The Tai-Ahoms performed religious ceremonies called *Om-phā*, *Sāi-phā* and *Rik-Khan* and also made offerings to spirits like *kamlé*, *Rānglé* and *Rangbang*¹³ and to the presiding deities of the household, of the paddy field, of the forest and of the river. In the major worships animals were sacrificed and feasts were organized. *Omphā* is said to be the worship of Lengdon, the Lord of Heaven and the other gods too. It was performed by the king with considerable grandeur and innumerable animal sacrifices and *Sāiphā* was a congregational worship performed by the people in general. *Rik-Khan* is a kind of grand State ceremony which is performed as a victory celebration in which the priests invoke (*rik*) long life (*Khan*) the full expression being *Rik-Khan Mōng-khan* which means calling for the well-being of the king and the country. A great sinner is also expiated by the performance of the *Rik-khan* by the *Deodhāi* (*Mo-Shām*). *Bāilung* (*Mo-plang*) and *Mohan* (*Mo-Hung*) priests. The sinner is looked upon as dead to society and is given new life by the priests by performing this ceremony.

The ritualistic practices of Ahom worship continued down to the end of their rule in the Brahmaputra Valley but with diminishing

8. A. B., P. 1

9. A. B., P. 13

10. A. B., P. 15

11. A. B., P. 11

12. A. B., P. 15

13. A. B., P. 47

attraction after the acceptance of Hinduism by the Ahom monarchs in the middle of the seventeenth century. Other branches of the Tai race in south-east Asia embraced Buddhism, mainly of the Thera-vāda school. The ancestors of the Ahoms might have brought down to Burma a kind of mixed Buddhism from Yün-nān. But more probable is the influence of the Thera-Vāda Buddhism of Burma which made them perform *pujās* like that of Phurālōng, which is probably a variant of Phrā-lōng. Phrā-long refers to Lord Buddha. Phurā-lōng *pujā* is performed by the Ahom priests with Buddhist devotional songs in Tai-Ahom language and with great illumination by placing one hundred and one oil lights from the bottom to top of a trunk of banana plant erected in front of the priests representing a *Caitya*.¹⁴ The origin of this ceremonial worship without animal sacrifices appears to be the Jātaka story of the Buddha prevalent in the Thera-vādi Buddhist societies. But the form of the worship itself was developed by the Mahāyānists after the *mahāparinibbāna* of the Buddha.

The essence of Ahom Buddhism is 'Phurā-Tārā-Ālong.' It is same as 'Buddha-Damma-Sangha' or as the Burmese utter 'Phrā-Tārā-Hangkārā'. Ahom *Phurā* or *Phrā* is Buddha, *Tārā* is Dharma or Pali Dhamma, *Ālong* is Sangha. Long after the *parinibbāna* (Sans-*Parinirvāṇa*) of the Buddha his figures in meditative poses (*dhyāni murtis*) began to be installed in the Buddhist Vihāras. Thus were evolved five *dhyāni Buddhas*, namely Amitāva, Akṣobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava and Amogha siddhi.¹⁵ These were all male forms. Thus female forms or *Saktis* as consorts were conceived respectively as Tārā, Pāntārā, Mamakā, Locanā and Āryatārikā. Of *dhyāni* Buddhas Amitāva or Avalokitesvara is the first and most perfect form and conceived as compassionate and of eternal radiance. His *Śakti* is Tārā, who is conceived by the Buddhists of the Mahā-yāna school as the embodiment of wisdom (*prajñā*) or *dhamma*.

As to the origin of Amitāva or Avalokitesvara, 'in the *Sukhāvativyūha*, which was translated into Chinese between A. D. 148 and

14. Alexander Cosmo de koros thought that the introduction of the conception of Ādi-Buddha arose in Central India in the latter half of the tenth century. It originated, according to him, at Nālandā and 'homage is paid to Ādi-Buddha in the shape of a flame of five, which the priests consider as eternal, self-born and self-existent. It is said that Manjuśri erected a temple over it in order to preserve the flame. This temple is known as the Svayambhu Caitya. See B. Bhattacharyy's *Buddhist Esoterism* (Oxford) p. 127. In Phurā-lōng worship the lighted banana post is undoubtedly symbolical of this Caitya.

15. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya : *Buddhist Esoterism* (Oxford University Press, 1932) p. 80.

170, the name of Amitāva appears for the first time, who was the presiding deity of the Sukhāvati or the Akaniṣṭha heaven, where he is believed to have brought Avalokiteśvara into existence.' Amitāva or Padmapāni Avalokiteśvara Buddha is the "Phurā"¹⁶ of the Ahoms and his *dharmā* or wisdom (*prajñā*) is "Tārā" and the divinely enlightened 'sādhaka sangha' is called "Ālong"¹⁷

The Buddhist Tai Communities of Assam, such as Khāmti, Phāké, Khāmyāng, Āiton, Turong pronounce this formula as "Phrā-Trā-Sānghā". Phurā-lōng warship still prevails among the Ahoms, particularly among the priestly classes. Among the Hinduised Ahoms this worship is not a regular part of their religion to-day. It is instituted by them occasionally at certain festivals and gatherings. The phurā-lōng *pujā* is described in a Tai-Ahom Buddhist book entitled *Min-māng phurālūng* or *Memimāng*. This book teaches Buddhist principles of kindness and liberalism.

HINDUISATION

The twentieth Ahom monarch, Chao-Hpā Hsö-Tām-Lā (1648-1663), who assumed the Hindu name of Jayadhvaj Singha, was the first in the dynasty to receive initiation (*Śaran*) with all formality from a Vaiṣṇava abbot named Niranjan Bāpu in the year A. D. 1654 which was his sixth regnal year. Niranjan Bāpu was the first Satrādhikār (abbot) of the Āuniāti Satra (Vaiṣṇava monastery) in Mājuli in the district of Sibsāgar and Jayadhvaj Singha made a grant of land and *pāiks* (workers) for the maintenance of the Satra. That was the beginning of the Hindu period of the Ahom rule in Assam and since then every Ahom king officially assumed a Hindu name in addition to his Tai-Ahom name on accession to the throne. The coronation ceremony was also held both according to the Ahom and Hindu form.

Even from before the advent of the Ahoms Tāntric cults prevailed in Assam and the ancestors of Śankardeva, the chief Vaiṣṇava preacher in Assam, worshipped the Śakti with animal sacrifices. The Ahom system of worship was very similar to the Śakti worship of the Hindus. The Ahom monarchs obtained a Hengdān (short and narrow sword) as the symbol of royal power originally from Primal Śakti

16. *bu-ra* of the Burmese, See also Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India*, vol. II, p. 135.

17. From Presidential Address in Assamese by the late Kṣetradhar Borgohain delivered at the All Assam Buddhist conference held in March, 1946 at Bālīgaon, Upper Assam. See *Asomat Bauddha-Dharma* published by Krishnakanta Buragohain (Jorhat 1946).

(Ādyā Śakti) called Khān-Khām-Phā-Phā.¹⁸ The *Kālikāpurāṇa* of about the eleventh century A. D. is a Tāntric Upapurāṇa on Śakti worship. It gives an account of Kāmarupa, in which also the Upapurāṇa is supposed to have been composed.

The Pāla kings of Kāmarupa, who ruled during the tenth and eleventh centuries A. D., were the followers of Tāntric Buddhism and Kāmākhya was about that time a noted centre of Vajra-yāna school of that religion.

There was again a turning point in the religious history of Assam and of the Ahoms with the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Ahom king Hsö-Khrung-Hpā or Rudra Singha (1696-1714) brought Krishṇarām Bhattācharyya Nyāya-Vāgish a well known Brahmin Śakta priest from Śimlāgrām in Śāntipur of Nadia district in Bengal and established him at Kāmākhya on the Nilācal Hill four to five miles, by road, to the west from the town of Gauhati. As he had his residence on that hill he was popularly known as Parvatīā Gosāin. Unlike the policy of his great predecessors Rudra Singha imported eastern Indian dance, music and styles of dress to the Ahom capital. His son Hsö-Tān-Hpā or Śiva Singha (1714-1744) became a zealous desciple of the Parvatīā Gosāin and by breaking the time-honoured royal custom, married a non-Ahom girl named Phuleśwarī belonging to a *nat* family.

Under the influence of the newly adopted religion Phuleśwarī was not only made the Chief Queen by the king but was raised to the status of Bar-Rajā (king above king) since a *Rānī* is not installed as a monarch in the Ahom system. She attempted to bring about a transformation of the society by introducing certain Śakta principles into it. She enforced, for instance, the Hindu custom of cremating the dead among the Ahoms who from time immemorial used to bury them and to raise tumuli (*moidām*) over the graves, particularly if the dead are kings and nobles. She also used her royal power to compel her subjects including the Vaiṣṇava Mahantas to bow down to the image of the Goddess Durgā and observe the ritual practices of Śakta worship. She herself assumed the name of Pramathēvari, which is another name of Durgā. The Parvatīā Gosāin was also the first to introduce in the Ahom kingdom the Neo-Smārta doctrine and rules of ritual procedure which brought about a clash with the Assamēse Pundits who followed the Paurāṇic principles. The Gosāin also laid the rules of procedure for the worship of the gods and goddesses in all the temples at Gauhati. Phuleśwarī's imposition

18. See Kasinath Tamuli Phukan, *Assam Buranji Sēra* (Gauhati, 1964), p. 2.

of Śākta ritual formalities on the Śudra Mahantas of the radical Vaiṣṇavite sect. called Moāmariyās or Māyāmariyās, served as a serious threat to their freedom of conscience. Such Hindu sectarianism, with the rulers involved in it, provoked antagonism between the administration and the Moāmariyās. The latter obtained the active support of the exiled Princes, particularly of Mohanmālā Gohāin, the third son of Rudra Singha, which gave them the assistance of a considerable section of the population. Ill-treatment meted out by Kirtichandra Barbaruā, the de facto ruler, to the Moamariyās intensified the latter's hatred towards the Ahom rulers and ultimately led to the revolt of the Moamariyās during the reigns of Hsö-Nyeu-Hpā or Lakṣmī Singha (1767-1780) and Hsö-Hit-Pöng-Hpā or Gaurināth Singha (1780-1795) inviting thereby the first British intervention (Capt. Welsh's Assam Expedition) and all that followed in the affairs of Assam.

Śiva Singha became the most famous Śākta Monarch of the Ahom dynasty, who built many temples in the kingdom with copper-plate grants of land and pāiks for their maintenance and dedicated the temples either to Śivā or Śakti. His father Rudra Singha was essentially Śaiva though earlier Shri Shri Haridev Gosāin of Auniāti Satra initiated him to Vaiṣṇavism. The king set up a Śiva-linga, which, it is said, emitted flames burning *billvapatra*. Śiva Singea's wife Bar Rajā Phuleśvarī excavated a large tank, called Gaurī-Sāgar, building on its bank three temples dedicated to Śiva, Devī and Viṣṇu in the district of Sibsāgar not far distant westwards from the ancient capital city called Rangpur.

On the death of Phuleśvarī Śiva Singha married her sister Draupadī. Draupadī assumed the name of Ambikā, which is another name of Durgā, and became the Parvatīyā Kunwrī of the king, being second in rank to the Chief Queen. This Śiva-Durgā concept of the king and his consorts seems to have arisen from the growing Śākta influence under the spiritual leadership of the Parvatīyā Gosāin, of whom both the king and the queen, whether Phuleśvarī or Ambikā, became devoted disciples. In imitation of her sister Phuleśvarī Ambikā excavated one of the largest tanks called Śiva-sāgar in the present town of Sibsāgar and built three temples on its western bank and consecrated them to Śiva, Viṣṇu and Devi (Goddess). The Śiva temple is the largest and tallest in Assam with a goldēn dome at its pinnacle.

The Tāntric Gurus imparted *dikṣā mantra* to those who approached for it. But the Vaiṣṇava Gurus made disciples of people of all different castes and communities by the simple act of imparting *Śaraṇ* to them. The Buddhist formula of Śaraṇ consists of *tri-ratna*, namely,

Budhañ Śaranañ gacchāmi
 Dhammañ śaraṇañ gacchāmi
 Sangañ śaraṇañ gacchāmi

Śankardev, who flourished in the 15th and 16th century A. D., formulated śaraṇ, as

Nām (dharma), Deo (God or Krisṇadev), *Guru* (corresponding to Buddha, spiritual guide) and *Bhakat* (Bhakta Sangha). Hence it would be—

Nāmat Śaraṇ
 Deot śaraṇ
 Gurut śaraṇ
 Bhakatat śaraṇ.

Here the addition is God in the person of Krisṇadev over tri-ratna. By his extra-ordinary skill Śankardev combined diverse elements of culture, indigenous and foreign, in dress, tune, instrumental music, art and dance into as attractive local pattern to serve as a medium for congregational prayer to God. He made the pleasure of culture an adjunct to religion. He preached the creed of *Ek-Śaraṇ* that is, surrender to God alone (*Ekamevādviyañ, māmekañ śaraṇāñ braja* of *Bhāgvat Geetā Ek-deo ek-seo* of Śankardev). The missionary activities of Śankardev, his closest collaborator and desciple Mādhavdev and other followers brought about an era of great Vaiṣṇavite movement and religious transformation among the culturally backward common people in the plains of Assam and introduced refinements into the social habits of these people. Śankardev's teachings were essentially based an the Bhāgavat Purāṇa and the Geetā, He himself was a great poet, artist and religious Guru of the Bhakti school. He is looked upon as an *avatāra* of God by his desciples.

With the spread of Vaiṣṇavism *Satras* or Vaiṣṇavite monasteries sprang up everywhere in the villages of Assam and for every group of villages there was a Mahanta at the head of the local *Satra* to give spiritual guidance to the desciples. The earlier *Satra* were organised under the direction of Dāmodardev and Mādhavdev. The *Satra* was more or less modelled on the Buddhist monastīc system and constituted of a nāmghar (prayer house), *manikuta* (temple in which the *vighraha* or the *bhāgavat* is placed) and the *hāti* (the residence of the vaiṣṇava devotees). There are even today more than four hundred *Satras* in Assam. The biggest and richest *Satras* are Brahminical called Dāmodariyā. Head of other Vaiṣṇavite monasteries are Sūdra Kāyastha Mahantas. Those *Satras*

amongst them that followed the tenets of Purusuttam Thākur, the of Śankardev, are called Thākuriyā.

The Vaiṣṇavite movement in its earlier phase could not penetrate into the territories of the Ahom kingdom (mōng-dun-sun-khām), Preachers like Vanśīgopāldev tried to preach secretly and attempted to establish *Satras* here and there in Eastern Assam, but the Ahom kings suppressed their activities on political grounds. Powerful monarchs like Hsō-Seng-Hpā (Bratāp Singha : 1603-1641), who had to be always busy with building the kingdom on strong foundations, could not tolerate any institution that might divert the attention of the people from the main purposes of the State and divide up their allegiance between the temporal and spiritual authorities. At times the leaders of the neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement were suspected of involvement in political conspiracies against the ruling authority with the result that their missionary works had to be suppressed and institutions abolished. It is also a fact to be noted that the Ahoms and the tribes of the Mongoloid stock were not very much impressed by Vaiṣṇavism. Language was also a barrier to the propagation of the faith among these people.

But with the initiation of Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663) to this new cult by Nirañjandev and establishment of the four great *Satras* of Āuniāṭi, Dakṣiṇpāt, Garamūr and Kuruwābāhi with royal patronage the tempo of proselytizing activities of the Vaiṣṇava preachers increased with ever greater freedom in Eastern Assam, the home of the Ahoms. More than four hundred *satras* were established all over the country and the bulk of the Assamese population including the Ahoms became disciples of one or other of these *satras*. This brought about a radical change in faith, outlook and way of life of the Ahoms, whose religious and cultural background was different from that of the Hindu section of the population of the Kingdom.

The later Ahom kings after Rudra Singha and the chief nobles of the court adhered to the Śakti cult and performed State ceremonies of the Śakti worship. They also used to institute side by side the worship of their own *devatās* at Charāideo, the sacred centre of Ahom worship, in their own traditional form. This kind of dual worship continued down to the last of the Ahom kings.

Towards the close of the Ahom rule the Ahoms came almost completely under the influence of decadent Hinduism and sectarian development. They became divided as śāktas and Vaiṣṇavas. Only the priestly classes continued to follow the old Ahoms religion. There arose

also among the Vaiṣṇavas sub-sects. The followers of Mahāpurus Śankardev were called Mahāpurusias, those who followed Dāmodardev were called Dāmodariās and those who followed Aniruddhadev Māyāmariās. Again the Ahoms became divided into two sub-sects called *kecā* and *pakā* panthas. The *Kecā* Vaiṣṇava bhakats at their worship or prayer ceremonies place a *kirtan puthi* or a copy of the *Bhāgavat* on the alter and offer raw things such as rice, plantains and other fruits, mug, gram, soft rice, curd and sweets. The ceremony or nām-kirtan is performed with devotional songs. Their highest god is Kriṣṇa whom they regard as the full incarnation of Viṣṇu.

The *pakā* section of the Ahoms, forming probably the majority, follows undoubtedly a Tāntric line of worship. Their devotional songs indicate that the source of their religion is Śiva. It would require further investigation to bring out to light a fuller picture of their religion. The Ahoms to-day are almost completely dominated by the sectarian religion of the Hindus and they know little about their own racial religion, culture and language. The Ahoms of the *pakā* line are disciples of such *śatras* as *Cecā*, *Chalihā*, *Budbārī*, *Kātani*, *Kardoiguriā*, *Bāreghariā* and others all of which are of *Kālsamhati*. But *kālsamhati* Mahantas are Vaiṣṇavas, yet curiously enough they make disciples of people who are apparently Śaivites by their religious practice.

CHAPTER IV

AHOM ROYAL CUSTOM OF ISSUING COINS ON CORONATION

A. W. Botham, who has edited the Catalogue of the Provincial Coin Cabinet, Assam (vide sec. XXXIV, 2nd Edition, 1930), has written that "about 1530 A.D. under the leadership of Suhunmun, they (i. e., the Ahoms) succeeded in finally conquering their principal rivals, the Chutiyas and Kacharis, and were brought into intimate contact with the world outside the Assam Valley by an unsuccessful invasion of the Muhammadans, who then ruled over Eastern Bengal. Their success evidently inspired them to initiate the coinage of the Muhammadan kings of the Husaini dynasty, and in 1543 the first Ahom coin was issued by Suklinmun, the son of Suhunmun. This coin has an inscription in the Ahom language and script, and, following a statement made in the 'Yogini Tantra' that the Ahom country was octagonal, the coins are octagonal instead of round, but in other respects they follow closely coins of Nasrat Shah and Ghyasuddin, two of Ala-Uddin Husen Shah's sons."

Sir Edward Gait, on whose researches A. W. Botham's conclusion appears to have been based, holds the view that Shuklenmung (Suklinmun) "was the first Ahom ruler to strike coins an innovation which, like many others, may be ascribed to the greater inter-course that now prevailed with the more civilized countries west of Assam." (*A History of Assam,* p. 99).

The above account of coinage in Assam is based not only on a scanty and scattered collection of old coins but also on limited researches in the field of Assam history. Later publications of historical manuscripts have thrown further light on the coinage history of Assam carrying us back to the fourteenth century, in which the first Ahom coins of silver and gold with Tai-Ahom legends were struck by the 8th king Hsô-Dāng-Hpā alias Bamuni Konwar (1397-1407 A.D.) of the dynasty on his accession to the throne. Since then the practice had definitely grown with the subsequent monarchs of issuing coins on ascending the coronation building known as the Singarighar which contained a

throne of gold for the monarchs to occupy. The installation ceremony being enormously expensive some of the later monarchs used to strike coins even before formally ascending the throne (Harakanta Barua; *History of Assam*, edited by Bhuyan, pp. 19-20). Of course the remnants of these early coins are yet to be recovered from obscurity, if not entirely exhausted. It is interesting to note that in England, too, the first gold coin—the gold Noble worth two florins or 6s. 8d. was initiated by Edward III in 1344 A. D., which was just earlier by fifty three years than Shudangpha's coinage of gold in Assam, with silver coins circulating side by side in both the countries. As to the rate of exchange between the silver and gold coins of the times in Assam little is known from history.

During the reign of Hsö-Hurñ-Möng (Hsö-Hum-Hpā) alias Dihingñä Rajā (1497-1539) A. D.) coins of gold alone seemed to be in circulation in the Ahom Kingdom, while in the neighbouring state of the Kachāris the currency was of silver. Hsö-Hum-Möng, who was represented abroad as the Swarga Mahārājā of Udaigiri (i. e. the Great Celestial King of the Orient) or simply Swarganārāyaṇ, after he had carried his conquests westwards across Kamatā upto the Karatoyā river, deputed Sonkhām Ghar Sandikoi as his envoy and minister plenipotentiary to install Kamateśwar (King of Kamatā) on the throne of Koch Behar and thereafter to proceed to Jagannath Thākur for constructing and consecrating a tank to the deity.

The visit to Jagannāth was arranged by the Mission through Vikramsen, the King of Orissa. A sum of two hundred gold mohurs was allotted by the Assam Rajā, Hsö-Hum-Möng, for the purpose of the Mission's expenditure at Jagannāth and was spent by the Mission in the following manner:—40 mohurs were spent on constructing and consecrating the tank; 60 were donated to the Boirāgis and Brahmins, 60 were given as offering to the Jagannāth Thākur and 40 were presented to King Vikramsen. (*Assam Buranji*, edited by S. K. Bhuyan, 1945, pp. 27.8).

On another occasion there was a clash between Shuhummung and the Kachāri King, Khunkhārā. Being defeated in the battles Khunkhārā escaped to Burma. At this opportunity the old dislodged Kachāri King Neusung approached Hsö-Hum-Möng with a present of two hundred Kachāri rupees and represented that the territory of his kingdom had been forcibly occupied by Khunkhārā in the past and now that the aggressor was defeated and driven out the kingdom be restored to the lawful ruler. The two monarchs then negotiated for a settlement.

Shuhummung demanded as a price, among others, a sum of one thousand and five hundred rupees from the Kachāri King which the latter agreed to pay. The Kachāri King was then installed as a ruler of his old country by Hsö-Hum-Möng with guarantees of protection at the brickbuilt capital, which was, in all probability, the historical city of Dimāpur. (*Deodhai Asam Buranji*, edited by Bhuyan, pp. 25-6).

Whether the Ahom Kings from Hsö-Klen-Möng (1539-1552) downwards actually followed the coins of Nasrat Shah and Ghyasuddin or not, there can be little doubt that the above account of coinage was that of an independent development in Assam, for, we know from the "Buchanan Manuscripts" that Nasrat Shah's reign commenced about 1523 A. D. On the other hand, it is recorded in the Asiatic Research, Vol. II, 180 that "Hoseyn Shah, a King of Bengal, undertook an expedition against Assam in which he had at first considerable success. The raja retired to the mountains, and the son of the king was left with a large army to keep possession of the country. In the rainy season the raja descended into the plains and destroyed the whole invading army, who were all either killed or made prisoners."

It was this disaster that undoubtedly compelled the Sultan of Bengal to quit Kamatāpur after he had held that country for a short period of one or two years under his sway. Husen Shah's reign began about 1496 A. D. while Hsö-Hum-Möng ascended the throne of Assam in 1497 A. D. Though Nilāambar, the last of the Khyen Kings of Kamatā, whose rule extended eastwards to the Bar Nadi and westwards as far as the Karatoyā, was overthrown by Husen Shah in 1498 A. D., the Muhammadan aggressors were soon swept back beyond the Karatoyā by a powerful expeditionary force of Hsö-Hum-Möng. After thus recovering the Kamatā Kingdom from the Muhammadan occupation Hsö-Hum-Möng restored it to the Kamatā dynasty, presumably to be held under the protection of the Ahoms.

Thus the inference drawn from certain similarities between the Assam and Bengal coins that it was Hsö-Klen-Möng *alias* Garhgayā Rajā (1539-1552 A. D), who imitated the coins of Husen Shah's successors, is not well-founded on the facts of contemporary history. It is difficult to believe that Hsö-Klen-Möng would prefer an alien model all at once when there was already in existence a well-developed coinage system at home handed down by his predecessors from the time of Hsö-Dāng-Hpā. On the otherhand, it was not unlikely that Husen Shah or his sons after their campaign in Assam, introduced a

coinage system in Bengal closely resembling the one that prevailed in Assam at that time.

The version that the Assam country was octagonal in shape is equally unconvincing. It is not corroborated by any authentic account in history. Even if it be so, it could not have been the influence of the *Yogini Tantra* to determine the form of the coin. The Ahom King did not formally embrace Hinduism at the time so as to be influenced by it in the formulation of state policy. The idea was possibly derived by Hindu writer from the Hindu conception of eight directions of the earth or space,. Accordingly the coin might represent the idea of a mighty kingdom extending in all the eight directions of the country, for there had never been a kingdom as large as that of the Ahoms in Assam before. This event of history was perhaps mentioned in the *Yogini Tantra* in its characteristic style and not that the king acted by following any prescription of the said Tantra. The actual reason why the coins were so shaped might be technical or otherwise. Moreover the *Yogini Tantra* was concerned more with religious mysticism than with any such authentic accounts of political geography and is therefore not to be solely relied on for validating facts like these without adequate support from history. There were also square coins issued by other kings of the dynasty. Śiva Singha, who embraced Śākta form of Hinduism, issued such coins.

There was a remarkable development of coinage during the later period of the Ahom rule. From the reign of Hsö-Khrung-Hpā *alias* Rudra Singha (1696-1714 A.D.) the royal mint was kept constantly at work issuing not only standard coins of one tola or 96 ratis in sufficient quantities but also coins of smaller denomination down to units of 3 ratis. Another notable characteristic was that coins bearing legends in different scripts and languages were struck. Uptill now coins of Ahom rulers bearing legends in Ahom, Devanagiri, old Assamese and Persian scripts have been found and the languages used in them were Tai (Ahom), Sanskrit, old Assamese and Persian.

To give an idea of the coinage of the later period I cannot do better than reproduce from Robinson's *Descriptive Account of Assam*. pp. 249-50. the following list of the Assam coins in the collections of Messrs. Marsden and Prinsep. Most of them are also in Captain Wemyss's collection : those marked with an asterisk are his only.

Surganarain.	1570
Chakradhaj,	*1575, 1576, 1585,
	(Ahom Characters).

Gadadhar Sing,	1603.
Rudra Sing,	1616, 18, 19, *22, *26, *27, *30, 31.
Sib Sing,	1637. 41, 43, 47, *53, 61.
Sib Sing's Queens.	
Phuleswari	1647
Pramatheswari,	1649, *52.
Ambika Devi,	1650, 51, 58, 60.
Surbeswari,	1661. *63, 66.
Pramatha Sing,	1660, 62, *63, *66, 63, 9*9, *72, 72, 73, (some of these in Ahom characters).
Rajeswar Sing,	1674, 76, 78, 79, 81, 82, 84, *85, 88, 90, (In Ahom, Bengali, and Persian characters ; the one dated 1685, *in Captain Wemyss's collection, is inscribed with Nagri characters).
Ramakanta Sing,—	1691, (Rajeswar's elder brother, raised to the throne by the Moamariahs),
Lakmi Sing,—	1692, *93, *94, *95, *96, 97, *99.
Gowrinath Sing,—	1707, *08, *09, *10, *11.
Pretenders :—	
Bhorata Sing,—	1715, 16, *18.
Surbananda Sing,—	*1715, 16.
Kamaleswar Sing,—	1720.
Brijanath Sing,—	1739, 40 (father of Purunder Sing)
Chandra Kant Sing,—	1741

In the above list of coins the earliest available coin is of Swarga nārāyaṇ (Surgunarain) and not of Hsö-Klen-Möng. If by Swarganārāyaṇ Hsö-Hum-Möng is meant then the coin is of earlier date than Hsö-Klen-Möng's coins. But the date mentioned against Swarganārāyaṇ does not warrant that view. Further the dates mentioned in the list are found on scrutiny to be Śakābdas. Robinson made no note on it. The list is an incomplete one with many gaps. Hence Swarganārāyaṇ here must be Jayadhvaj Singh (A. D. 1648-1663).

So far as it is known Rudra Singha was the first King to issue coins weighing 48 and 24 ratis. Still smaller coins, weighing 12 and 6 ratis: were first issued by Śiva Singha, and coins weighing 3 ratis by Gaurinath Singha, • Śiva Singha (Chao Hsö-Tan-Hpā) is credited with the introduction of a regular gold currency in the kingdom. From numismatic

records it is definitely ascertained that at least during the reigns of two other kings—Hsö-Klen-Möng and Hsö-Nyat-Hpā before Śiva Singha gold coins were the chief media of exchange. Earlier coins always had legends in the Ahom language and character. But from the time of Jayaddhaj Singha (Hsö-Tām-Lā 1648-1663 A. D.) the first of the Ahom Kings to be initiated into Hinduism, coins began to be struck with Sanskrit legend in old Assamese or Devanagri character. Thus the coins of Jayaddhaj Singha and Chakraddhaj Singha (Hsö-Pöng-Möng) bore sanskrit legends in the old Assamese script. The next three rulers led by Udayāditya revived the system of Ahom legends, but from Rudra Singha onwards the use of Sanskrit became the rule with occasional deviations as in the case of Pramatha Singha and Rājeśwar Singha. Square coins with Persian legends were issued by Śiva Singha in 1729 A. D. and by Rājeswar Singha in 1752. A square coin, with a Śanskrit legend was also issued by Lakshmi Singha in 1770. Most of Siva Singha's coins bore also the name of his chief queen for the time being. The common feature of the Ahom currency, whether with Ahom or Sanskrit legends, was that obverse gave the name of the king and the date of issue, and the reverse the name of his favourite deity. As an instance, I cite below from Gait's *History of Assam*, 1926, p. 243 the translation of the Ahom legend on Hsö-Klen-Möng's coins :—

Obverse. The great king Hsö-Klen-Möng, fifteenth year (of cycle).

Reverse. I the king offer prayers to Tārā.

The cycle referred to is the greater Jovian cycle of sixty years, known to Hindu astrologers as Vrihaspati Chakra or wheel of Jupiter, which was in use amongst the Chinese, 2696 (astronomical) years before the Christian era. The astronomical year for years B. C. is one less than the secular year ; thus B.C. 2696 is the secular year 2697. (The *Shu King* tran. by W.G. Old. 1904. p. 302)

As a typical coin bearing a Sanskrit legend we may take that of Chakraddhaj Singha which reads :—

Obverse. Of Svargadev (heavenly deity) Chakraddhaj Singha, Sak 1385 (1663 A.D.)

Reverse. Devoted (genitive) to the feet of Śiva and Rām.

Gait observes that “the deities most commonly mentioned are Indra on the coins with Ahom, and Śiva (with or without his consorts) on those with Sanskrit legends ; but Vāishnava usurpers, Bharath and

Sarbānand, invoked Krishṇa, while Brajanāth invoked both Rādhā and Krishṇa.”

Besides being a source of knowledge of reigning dates of the kings the coins furnish also an excellent clue to the study of evolution of religious beliefs of the Ahom Kings. Though after conversion to Hindu faith the Ahom rulers started inscribing on their coins the sacred names of their adopted Hindu deities, the coins of the rulers of the earlier period bore the names of deities of their original home in China. In this connection the mention of Tārā in King Hsō-Klen-Mōng's Coin is significant. The Goddess Tārā is actually the National Goddess-Protectress of Tibet, who is imagined in numerous forms and colours. It was Nāgārjuna who first imported from the country of Bhota the worship of Tārā in the form of Ekajatā into India and incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon. Nāgārjuna flourished about the middle of the seventh century and was one of the earliest writers on Tāntric Buddhism. Tārā is described as decked in five mudras as Ekajatā (one-chignoned,) and as holding the figure of Akṣobhya, an emanation of the Dhyāni Buddha Akṣobhya, on her crown. Ugra-Tārā of the Ugra-Tārā temple at Gauhati is but one of the several forms of Ekajatā, a fierce divinity, the other forms being Mahācinatārā, Vedyujvalakarāli, Arya-Ekajatā and Sukla-Ekajatā. Ekajatā, known as Mahācinatārā, has the same appearance at that of the Hindu deity, Tārā. It is mentioned in Rudra Yāmala that one of the Vashisthas attained perfection by worshipping Tārā of China-bhumi. It was probably the same Vashistha that first settled on the bank of the Dikhaus river in Sibsagar and then shifted his hermitage to present Vashisthāshram in Kamrup. Thus the Tibetan Goddess Tārā first appeared as a Buddhist deity and then found her place among the ten Mahāvidyā goddesses of the Hindu pantheon (W. Y. Evans - Wents : *Tibet's Great Yogi Milārepa*, 1928 p. 241, Dr. B. Bhattacharyya : *An Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism*, 1932, pp. 147-55.

It may also be noted that the Tai-Ahoms worshipped a deity called Phu-rā Tārā Ālang, which is Phrā-Tārā-Ālong meaning Goddess-Tārā-Almighty. It seems later Buddhism transformed Phurā-Tārā-Ālong into Buddha-Dhamma-Sangha. Tārā must have been one of the chief deities worshipped by the ancient Tai or, at least, by the section that migrated to Assam. It may also be assumed that inscriptions in Ahom had reference to their own deities. In this context it is no wonder that Hsō-Klen-Mōng's coins bore the legend of Tārā as his favourite deity.

We know from Robinson that when the British Government came into possession of Assam a variety of coins were found current in it.

These coins were the Rājmhri, or the coins of the Assam Rājās ; the Nārāyaṇī or the Koch Behar rupee ; the Company's sicca rupee ; the Deva Mohri of Bhutan and the Arcot Rupee. Of these the Rājmhri and the Nārāyaṇī rupees had the most extensive currency ; the former in Upper and the latter in Lower Assam. The Rājmhri was of the same value as an old rupee called the Sonat rupee ; but the silver was of somewhat superior quality ; in ordinary transactions it was taken at par with the latter coinage. The Assamese had sufficient quantities of subsidiary money down to one anna pieces for use for purposes of small change and purchase, Copper coinage was till late unknown in Assam, cowries or small shells being used for petty transaction. In larger commercial dealings, coins were seldom used. The whole trade of Assam with Bengal at that time was mainly on barter basis, particularly Assam silk, lac, cotton, pepper, elephants' teeth since Gaurinath Singha's, reign, and other products being exchanged directly for Bengal salt, broad cloths of Europe, cotton cloths of Bengal, jewellery, spices and Military stores.

In addition to the silver coinage, there was a plentiful supply of gold mohurs of good intrinsic value. The exchange value of these gold mohurs varied from twelve to fourteen Company's Rupees a piece. Side by side with the gold coins, round balls of gold, usually weighing one tola each, also passed current.

The system that was introduced soon after the British occupation of Assam was that the accounts of Lower Assam were kept in Sicca as well as Nārāyaṇī rupees ; but subsequently in Siccas only. The Sicca rupee was introduced by the East India Company's Government and contained 176 grains of pure silver and was equal to about 2s. 2d. sterling. Sicca meant simply an Indian jeweller's weight of 180 grains Troy. In Darrang, the Collector's accounts were kept partly in Rājmhri, partly in Nārāyaṇī and partly in Sicca rupees, to the confusion of all payers, and to the great gain of the Treasurers and Poddars.

To avoid this confusion in the exchanges between the local coins, steps were taken to replace them by a single currency. With that view the Government prohibited the existing coins from being reissued and remitted them to the Calcutta mint. In their place in 1835 the new Sonat Rupee was introduced into the province. But the accounts were again disturbed. In 1836-37, therefore, the Company's Rupees were introduced, which then formed the common currency of Assam and became stabilized. The Company also put into circulation fractional parts such as half rupee, quarter rupee etc. and gradually replaced the cowries by pice and pie pieces of copper.

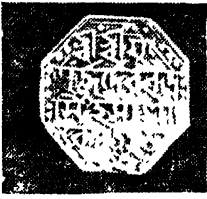
Very few transactions were made with other parts of India by bills of exchange, there being no regular bankers in the province of

Assam during those days. Drafts on the General Treasury at Calcutta were, however, obtainable at all the treasuries in the province at a premium of one per cent. The remittances of the Marwari merchants were made chiefly in local produce and partly in gold bullion.

The value of the currency of that period of Company's rule is indicated by the prices of commodities prevailing during that time. Thus :- 5 seers of rice, valued at 1 anna : an Erea cloth Rs. 3/- ; 1 cow Rs. 2/8/- ; 1 duck 2 as. ; 1 bhar of rice 4 as. ; 1 seer of oil 4 as. ; Comparatively salt was dearer, for the price of 1 seer of salt was 4 as. (Sketch of Assam by an officer 1847, pp. 214-16). To-day in Assam, 1971 :- 1 Kg. of rice is valued at Rs. 1.25 to Rs. 2.00 according to quality, 1 duck is valued at Rs. 2.50 to 3.50 and 1 litre of mustard oil Rs. 5.50. This is due to the increase of purchasing power of the people, but mainly due to price inflation.

Appendix—A.

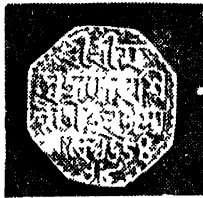
Some specimens of Ahom and Koch coins collected by the writer 1—



1

Obverse

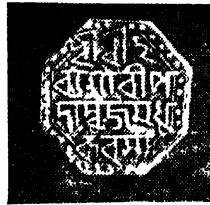
Sri Srimat
Svargadeva
Rudra Singhasya
sāke 1626.



2

Obverse

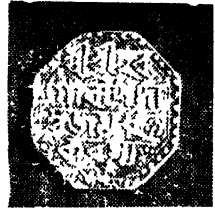
Sri Srimat
Svargadeva
Siva Singh
nripasya
sāke 1664



1

Reverse

Sri Sri Hara
Gauripa
dāmbuja madhu
karasya



2

Reverse

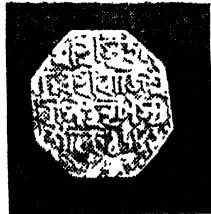
Sri Sri Hara
Gauripadambuja
madhu karasya



3

Obverse

Sri Sri Svarga
deva Pramatta
Singha Nripa-
sya sāke 1648



4

Obverse

Sri Sri Svarga-
deva Sri Rāje-
swara Singha
nripasya
sāke 1682



3

Reverse

Sri Sri Hara
Gauri Carana
kamala maka-
randa madhu.
karasra



4

Reverse

Sri Sri Hara
Gauri Carana
kamala madhu
irasya

Svargadeva Rudra Singha's Silver coin	— 1 Obverse	1 Reverse
Svargadeva Siva Singha's Silver coin	— 2 Obverse	2 Reverse
Svargadeva Pramatta Singha's Silver coin	— 3 Obverse	3 Reverse
Svargadeva Kājeswar Singha's Silver coin	— 4 Obverse	4 Reverse.

No. 5, 6, 7 are gold coins.
No. 8, 9, 10 are silver coins.

5
Obverse (Gold Coin)
Sri Gaurimath



6
Obverse (Gold Coin)
Sri Sri Lakṣmi
Singha
Narendrasya



7
Obverse (Gold Coin)
Sri Candra Kanta



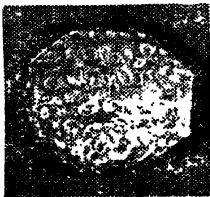
5
Reverse (Gold Coin)
Singha
nripasya



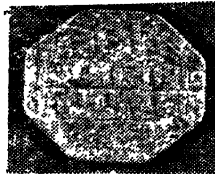
6
Reverse (Gold Coin)
Sri Sri Hara
Gauripadāparasya



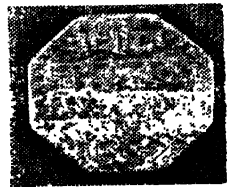
7
Reverse (Gold Coin)
Singha
nripasya



8
Obverse
Chao Hsō pāt
Hpā pin khun lākni
rāisān

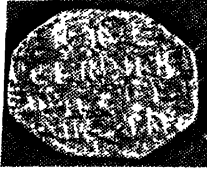


9
Obverse
Sri Srimat
Svargadeva Rudra
Singhasva
sāke 1622



10
Obverse
Sri Sri nrīdeva
Sri Gaurināth
Singha nripasya
sāke 1716

i. e. Chao Hso-Pāt-Hpā
became king in the
year rāisān (A.D. 1681).



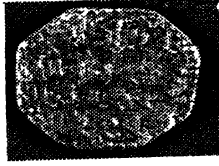
8

Reverse

Kāo Rāi

(Rest could not be
fully deciphered,
but Lengdon is men-
tioned; probably”

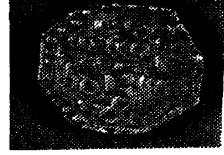
“I bow down to
Lenghon’s) The legends
are in Tai Script.



9

Reverse

Sri Sri Hara
Gaurīpadāmbuja
madhu karasya



10

Reverse

Sri Sri Hara
Gaurī Carana
kamala makaranda
madhu karasya

The legends on the above Ahom coins bear the names of the following
Ahom kings :-

<i>Monarchs</i>	<i>Reigning period.</i>
5. Gaurinath Singha	A. D. 1780-1795
6. Laksmi Singha	A. D. 1769-1780
7. Chandrakanta Singha	A. D. 1810-1818
8. Chāo Hso-Pāt-Hpā <i>alias</i> Gadādhara Singha	A. D. 1681-1696
9. Rudra Singha	A. D. 1696-1714.

CHAPTER V

THE BACKGROUND OF SECTARIAN DIVISIONS AMONG THE PRESENT-DAY TAI-AHOMS

The Tai-Ahoms entered the Brahmaputra Valley, now called Assam Valley, early in the thirteenth Century A. D. with a religion, culture and political system of their own. They found the valley fertile and beautiful and called it Mông-Dun-Shun-Khām (now called Upper Assam) which means a country full of golden gardens, that is, full of golden paddy fields. They conquered the valley by gradual stages and made it their home-land and gave it an administrative system which had the vitality to last for six hundred years till the advent of the British.

The subject matter of this chapter will be a historical treatment of the religious policy, practices and problems of the Tai-Ahoms since their settlement as a ruling race in this new land with special emphasis on their present-day divisions between different religious sects of Hinduism.

Upto the reign of Tao-Khām-Thi (1380-1389), the seventh king in 'Hsö-Kā-Hpā's line, the influence of Hinduism, if there was any, was negligible both in the royal Court and among the Tai people of the kingdom. But an unhappy affair in the family of Tao-Khām-Thi created for the first time a situation which made it possible for the Brahminical influence to penetrate into the royal Court and enjoy a privileged position in the kingdom. In a military campaign against the Chutiya's Tao-Khām-Thi was temporarily absent from the capital. He had placed his elder of the two wives in charge during his absence with power to manage the affairs of the State. She having no issue was envious of the younger wife who was then pregnant. The queen ordered her execution on a false charge, but the Burā Gohāin enabled her to escape in a raft. She was rescued and given shelter by a Brahmin in Hābung (now district Lakhimpur). There, in due course, she delivered a male child who was later brought to the capital by the nobles and placed on the throne after Tao-Khām-Thi's death without leaving behind any child. This young king, who assumed the name of Hsö-Dāng-Hpā, in gratitude for the care taken of his early life, brought and settled the Brahmin family in the capital at Charaguā in Dihing.

The King made the Brahmin his confidential adviser and gave his seven sons estates with the status of Princes. The Brahmin brought with him to the capital his tutelary deities of Lakṣmi and Nārāyaṇ called

Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇ Sālagrām, that is, a black-stone representing the Vighrahas of Lakṣmī and Nārāyaṇa. These sacred vighrahas were looked upon as objects of veneration at the royal palace and Brahminical religion and rites found an honoured place under this king who ruled from A. D. 1398 to 1407. Since then Hinduism as practised by the Brahmins in Upper (Eastern) Assam began to grow in influence with royal patronage.

King Hsö-Hum-Möng's reign (1497-1539) marked a new stride in the progress of Hinduism in the Ahom kingdom, for during this period the Brahminical influence considerably increased in the Ahom Court and Kingdom and the title of *Svarga Nārāyaṇ* was conferred on the king, probably at the coronation, by the Brahmin priests which was thereafter held from this time both in the Ahom and Hindu form. Gait points out that this new title of *Svarga Nārāyaṇ*, was henceforth affixed by the Ahom kings on their official documents. Hsö-Hum-Möng was also the first Ahom king to use the *śaka* era in the official calendar.

The local tribal forms of worship, which may be called animistic in the modern sense and which may have some outward resemblance to ancient Ahom worship, did not have any noticeable impact on the Ahom religious life. On the other hand they were specially fascinated by the philosophies of the prevailing Hinduism whether of Vaiṣṇava or Tāntric school with the result that the Ahom rulers started promoting the interest of these new cults even at the cost of their own religion.

After Hsö-Hum-Möng another instance of preferential treatment for Hindu gods is noticed when in view of the impropriety of having both *Chumdeo* (Chumphā), the guardian deity of the Ahom kings, and Hindu deities Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇ representing two distinct faiths inside the palace Hsö-Klen-Möng (1539-1552), the fifteenth Ahom monarch installed the *Chumdeo* in a separate temple outside the palace but inside the main Gate of the palace compound. (*vide* Kasi Nath Tamuli Phukan's *Assam Buranji*, 1st Ed., p. 23).

At the same time the powerful neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement with its popular appeal began to gain ground all over the country under the leadership of Śrī Śankardev and Mādhavdev. Chao-Hpā Hsö-Tām-Lā or Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663), who was the twentieth Ahom king, not only got himself initiated into Hinduism of the neo-Vaiṣṇava faith by Śrī Niranjandev, a successor of Mishradev of Kuruābāhī *Satra* but also established the principal *Satras* or Vaiṣṇava monasteries in Mājuli in Upper Assam with large donations of land and Paiks (workers). He was the first Ahom king to formally embrace Hinduism. Since then the *Satra* institution had become the order of the day and more than

six hundred *Satras* sprang up one after another all over Assam during the reigns of the subsequent Ahom kings. Heads of *Satras* were either Brahmin Gosāins or Śūdra Mahantas.

The *Satras* may be arranged under four traditional groups, namely, 1. Brahma Saṁhati, 2. Kāla Saṁhati, 3. Puruṣa Saṁhati, and 4. Nikā Saṁhati. Almost all the *Satras* of Brahma Saṁhati have as their Heads Brahmin Gosains. But of the other three Saṁhatīs the number of Brahmīns and non-Brahmīns (generally Kāyasthas) as Heads are more or less equally divided.

Next after Jayadhvaj Singha Hsō-Nyat-Hpā or Udayāditya (1669-1673), the twenty—second king, happened to come under the influence of a Vaiṣṇava Boirāgī, named Paramānanda, from Brindāvan, who was supposed to be one Chakrapāni, a relations of Śri Śankardev. The king was so much impressed to hear his religious discourses that he built for the latter a *Satra* in the direction of the Chunpurā Gate near the capital. He also gave him a grant of land at Sāmaguri and accepted him as his preceptor. The nobles of his Court also followed the example of the king and became disciples of the Boirāgī. The king then in his fanatic zeal summoned the twelve Thākurs (Mahantas of Purusottam Thākur's sect) and asked them to get themselves initiated (Śaraṇ) to the cult of the Boirāgī and remarked that "even the twelve Mahantas can not be equal to the Boirāgī in spiritual merit."

Such interference of the king in matters of conscience and faith caused bitter displeasure among the local priesthood and their followers. A strong armed band under the leadership of Deberā of Dakṣinpāt, seized power, deposed the king and executed him. The Boirāgī was put into a cage and later impaled and set adrift on a raft down the river Dikhau.

The Political stability of the kingdom virtually collapsed and several Princes in quick succession were placed on the throne and deposed and murdered by the all-powerful rebel leader Deberā who was at the time the defecto ruler of the kingdom. The crisis continued for not less than seven years when Hsō-Pāt-Hpā or Gadādhār Singha, a Tungkhungīā Prince of exceptional ability and vigour, succeeded to the throne after an enormous sacrifice and privations and restored the stability of the kingdom. This was a historic instance of disastrous political consequences of fanatical attachment of a Head of State to a particular creed of religion.

Gadādhār Singha (1681-1696) was the greatest king of the later Ahom period and was undoubtedly the greatest among the rulers of the Tungkhungīā Dynasty. He consolidated on a strong foundation a ruined

country and beat off the last greatest Moghul invasion. He inherited the blood and vigour of his great ancestors possessing a towering personality above other Princes. He was hundred per cent Ahom in his social and religious outlook. He was not opposed to Hinduism as such and was more favourably disposed to Tāntrism and built the temple of Umānanda at Gauhati, but observed that the Vaiṣṇava Satrādhikārs (Heads of *Satras*) of his time, instead of leading an austere life in keeping with their ideals misused their privileges by gathering round them wealth and luxuries and venturing to interfere with high political affairs of the state.

Some of the Vaiṣṇav Gosāins were so ambitious as to conspire to seize the royal power. As for instance, one Mishradev, a desciple of Vanśīgopāldev, one of the earliest Vaiṣṇava Missionaries of the time of Hsó-Hseng-Hpā or Pratāp Singha (called by the Hindus Buddhi Svarganārāyaṇ, 1603-1641), became Head of the Kuruābāhī Satra. But he used to amass wealth and live in luxury by abandoning the austere life of a Vaiṣṇava *guru*. His aspiration went so high as to enter into a conspiracy to seize royal power. This secret preparation was reported to the king and the latter, on invastigation, found the Gosāin guilty of conspiracy. The Gosāin was then detained in a prison where he later died and the *Satra* of Kuruābāhi was abolished.

Another instance is that when, with the active support of the great nobles, Bandar Bar Phukan was escorting Gadādhār Singha to Garhgaon from Kaliābar for ascending the throne Chota Vanamālī Bāpu of Dakṣiṇpāt *Satra* met the Bar Phukan on the way and urged him not to place Gadādhār on the throne. The Bāpu by using his position as a Preceptor pointed out that since both the Bar Phukan and the then puppet king Hsó-Lik-Hpā or Larā Rajā were his disciples he himself was the virtual ruler of the kingdom. (*vide* Kasinath Tamuli Phukan's *Assam Buranji*, 1906, pp. 44-45).

King Jayadhvaj Singha, just before his death, invited Vanamālīdev to the royal camp at Bakatā and placed the responsibility of running the administration on his hands. The Gosāin, however, handed over the charge to the next king Chakradhvaj, Singha when the later was elected to the throne after an inter regnam. (*vide* Records preserved in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati). These facts show to what extent the Vaiṣṇava Gosāins gained control over the Ahom administration in the seventeenth century. To the common people loyalty to the king and loyalty to the Guru became equally important and to both, they thought, it was obligatory to pay taxes.

Thus they paid *rāj-kar* to the king and *guru-kar* to the Guru or Satrādhikar. The followers (*bhakat*) of the Vaiṣṇava Gosāins claimed exemption from military service and public works. This gave an impetus to what are today called socially caste-Hindus, namely, the Brahmiṇs Kalitās and Kāyasthas to become 'Bhakats' (*Bhaktas*) inside the *Satras* and only the members of these communities were admitted to the *hāṭis* (quarters within the compounds of the Vaiṣṇava monasteries) and this is in evidence even to-day. By being so admitted they also enjoy a social status higher than the working classes.

The religion of the country took a new turn when Hsö-Khrung-Hpā or Rudra Singha (1696-1714), who was already a desciple of Haridev Adhikārī of the Āuniāṭi *Satra*, invited a learned and well-known Śākta Gosāin, named Kriṣṇarām Bhattacharya Nyāy-vāgish, from Simlāgrām in Śāntipur in the Nadiā district of Bengal to be his spiritual guide. He was settled at Kāmākhyā (properly Kāmākṣā) on the Nilāchal Hill (*parvat*) near Gauhati from which he was called Parvatiyā Gosāin. Since then the later Ahom kings had Śākta Gosāins of Kriṣṇarām's line as their preceptors. The Vaiṣṇava line of preaching with the simple ceremony of *Śaraṇ* was carried on by the Gosāins and Mahantas of neo-Vaiṣṇavite school chiefly among the common masses of population, who were mostly illiterate. To the Vaiṣṇavas the *Bhāgavata* was the main source of religious ideas.

Hsö-Tān-Hpā or Śiva singha, the eldest son of Rudra Singha, ascended the throne in 1714. He himself and his queen Phuleśwarī of Non-Ahom origin became devout disciples of Kriṣṇarām or of his son Rāmānanda according to an account of the present Parvatiyā Gosāin's family. Soon after Śiva Singha's accession his wife Phuleśwarī was raised to the position of real ruler or Bar Rajā (king over king) of the kingdom on the advice of the priests in order to avert an evil moment of fall of the royal power (*Chatra bhangayoga*). While functioning as Bar Rajā Phuleśwarī offended the invited Śūdra Mahantas and Medhis of the Vaiṣṇava sect by compelling them to bow down to the image of Goddess Durgā and conform to the Śākta forms of religious practice.

This she did when she had learnt that the Mahantas had no faith in the worship of the Goddess. This foolish act of sectarian fanaticism on the part of the queen particularly injured the position and prestige of the highly respected Moāmora Mahanta who had a large following. Previous to this for nearly five hundred years of rule no Ahom monarch is ever known to have imposed the Ahom religion and customs on others. But Phuleśwarī imposed her faith on the subjects and ordered the Ahoms to follow the Hindu custom of cremating the dead instead of burying them.

She also compelled the Thākuriā Mahājans (Gosāins of the Vaisṇavite sect of Puruṣottam Thākur, grandson of Śankardev) to follow the liturgical rules of Āuniāī and Garamur *Satras* and ordered the original statues (vigrahas) of the temples to be thrown into the Lohit river replacing them with images made of stone and brass. (*vide* original Assamese *Tungkhungiā Buranji*, 1932. Ed. by S. K. Bhuyan, p. 38).

Queen Phuleśwarī's sectarian policy alienated the Marāns and Mataks, all followers of the Mahanta of Moāmarā, for good, and since then the latter had been preparing for revenge. With such beginnings of the trouble almost to the end of the Ahom rule armed hostility of the Moāmariā rebels continued to be the greatest internal problem. During the time of Lakṣmī Singha (1769-1780) the Moāmariās gathered strength and challenged the Ahom government and dislodged it from power. The rebels set up their own administration and ruled for a short period before it was suppressed. Again there was a temporary ascendancy of the Moāmariās during the reign of Gaurināth Singha (1780-1795). Being helpless Gaurināth had to appeal to the English Collector of Rangpur for armed assistance. It was Captain Welsh who came with a force and liquidated the Moāmariā regime and restored the Ahom power.

The Ahom rulers were tolerant of all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and tribal cults. They allowed all communities to enjoy their freedom of conscience. There was no religious persecution nor religious riots between communities in the Ahom kingdom. It was only Phuleśwarī's mad policy that created conditions for a civil war for the first time in the long history of Ahom rule in Assam. The Ahom kings patronized Hinduism with liberal grants of land and labour for the maintenance of Hindu religious institutions such as temples and *Satras*. They also welcomed Muslim *Pirs* for the Muslims and granted for their maintenance lands called *Pirpāl* grants, a precedent set by Mirjumla.

But the sectarian development of Hinduism with its caste-ridden social system became the breeding ground of sectarian divisions among the Hindus themselves, which, by destroying the strong and unitary foundation of the Ahom kingdom, made it a prey to external enemies. The period of Ahom religion as the religion of the race upto the reign of Hsö-Hseng-Hpā (1603-1641) or Pratāp Singha, which means more than 400 years out of 600 years of Ahom rule, was also the period of glorious victories and expansion of the kingdom, but the subsequent change of religion on the part of the rulers beginning with Hsö-Tām-Lā or Joyadhvaj Singha generated socio-religious forces quite unsuited to a virile and caste-free race like the Ahoms and the result was that by stages the kingdom began to shake and shrink in strength till the advent of the British in the third decade of the 19th century.

The Ahom priesthood (Mo-Shām, Mo-Hung, Mo-Plang or in Assamese Deodhāis, Mohans and Bāilungs) resisted the change over to Hinduism and even cursed the kings who initiated this revolutionary change in religious policy. The priests predicted ill of the future and subsequent misfortunes into which the country had fallen, such as the temporary conquest of Assam by Mirjumla, chaos from Udayāditya's reign to the accession of Hsö-Pāt-Hpā, Jaymati's torture and death and the Moāmariā rebellion, were ascribed to the adoption of an alien religion at its decadent and degenerate stage with all its inherant desintegrating elements and superstitions like sectarianism, casteism, taboos and untouchability.

As a reaction to the introduction of cremation among the Ahoms by order of Phuleśwarī the Ahom priests made an effigy of the deceased king Hsö-Rem-Hpā or Rājeśwar Singha (1751-1769) in clay; and having performed the *Rikkhvan* ceremony (*rik* : call, *Khvan* : life) buried it according to Ahom custom. Chakradhvaj Singha ascribed Jayadhvaj's misfortune to neglect of Ahom religion. Rajeśwar's successor Hso-Nyeu-Hpā or Laksmi Singha (1769-1780), who had been overthrown by the Marāñ rebels who set up their own rulers at the capital, began to realize, it is said, the unwisdom of adopting Hinduism and the correctness of the prognostications of the Ahom priests. But the Hindus soon regained their influence and at the suggestion of New Gosāin of the line of Parvatiā Gosāin Hindu Goddess Tārā, popular in Bengal, was worshipped with elaborate ceremony and immense amount of money was distributed to the Brahmins. The Ahom Priests refused to take part in this worship. (Gait : *A History of Assam*, p. 194 ; *Ahom Buranji* translated by G. C. Barua, pp. 195-196 ; *Notes* left by Nandanath Deodhāin Phukan).

As in the wider Assamese society so also among the Tai-Ahoms the rival cults of Hinduism in process of time created sectarian divisions. The picture of the Tai-Ahom race was that socially and religiously it was divided into Vaiṣṇavas and Śāktas; Vaiṣṇavism of the school of Śankardev of Kāyastha Bhuyan community prevailing among the masses and the rulers sticking to Śakti worship of the Kriṣṇarām's line. Followers of Mahāpuruṣ Śankardev are called Mahāpuruṣiās. To-day great many Ahoms are Mahāpuruṣiās though all them do not strictly adhere to the Mahāpuruṣiā rules of food and drink. The main Brahminical Satras are Dāmodariyā, that is, followers of another Brahmin Vaiṣṇava preacher named Dāmodar Dev. These Satras also have a considerable following from among the Tai-Ahoms, particularly of the ancient noble families.

To his bare teachings and 'Śaraṇ' system Śankardev introduced also as adjuncts congregational prayer with devotional songs, music and dance and other attractive cultural elements such as *bhawnā* in order to stimulate interest among men in the religion of his sect. His religion was based on the monistic theory of God and God's *avatārā* (incarnation) Śri Kriṣṇa as the only refuge of the initiated (Doctrine of Ek Śaraṇ—see *Ratnāvali*). Here the implication is Kriṣṇa is God Himself (*Kriṣṇastu bhagavān Svayaṁ of Bhāgavata*). Sankardew explained that it was better to worship Kriṣṇa who is at the root of all manifestations than to worship with elaborate ceremonies the various gods and goodesses. Since formless Brahman cannot be worshipped Kriṣṇa as full incarnation (*Avatāra*) of God or Brahman in human form is recommended as the object of worship for the Vaiṣṇava bhaktas. The worship, he prescribed, was simple with devotional songs, animal sacrifice and drink offering being strictly forbidden. The offerings of the Vaiṣṇavas should consist of raw rice, gram and fruits.

The Śāktas worship the Goddess in the form of Durgā, Kāli or Tārā of which images were conceived originally by seers. Durgā *pujā* is a grand public festival and Kāli *pujā* is performed in family environments with elaborate ceremonies and animal sacrifices the animal being mainly the goat. There are many *pithas* and *thāns* as centres of Goddess worship where for the propitiation of the Goddess birds, goats and even buffaloes are sacrificed and the blood offered. At the Kāmākhyā and Ugra Tārā Temples at Gauhati buffaloes are annually sacrificed at the *pujā*. Goddess Tārā was also worshipped occasionally in the later Ahom period in Assam. Historical evidence show that Durgā, Kāli and Tārā worship entered Assam from Bengal. Primitive forms of worship with animal sacrifice were there among the tribes even before the advent of Hindu Tāntric worship from Bengal.

Among the Tai people of Assam—more than a million—except the Tai-Ahoms (or simply Ahoms) all the rest, namely, Tai-Khāmti, Tai-Phāké, Tai-Khām-Yāng, Tai-Turong and Tai-Āiton are Buddhists of the Thera-vāda school. There are Buddhists and Buddhist Bhikus from among the Āhoms also, but their number is limited.

The present-day Tai-Ahoms have racial unity but are socially and religiously disintegrated by sectahrian Hinduism. About half of the community are Tāntric Śaivites who may be called Night-worshippers. They may be regarded as a secret sect found all over the Assam Valley districts. The members of the sect are known as *Purṇadhariā* devotees or *Bhakats* who hold on to the Perfect One. They

are also called *Barkheliā* Bhakats meaning worshippers belonging to the Great sect. But ordinarily people refer to them as *Rātikhowā* Bhakats or night-worshippers from the fact that they perform their ceremony of worshipping only at night in strict secrecy. They worship with offerings of meat and home-made liquor (*sāj*) prepared from rice, the meat being of fowls or pork. They sing also devotional songs composed in simple Assamese language but orally handed down by their Sādhus. Most of the songs are allegorical and at times elliptical with a touch of mysticism rendering it difficult for lay people to make out of them their real meaning. Beginning with the Sādhu all the chief devotees in the assembly drink from the same cup the liquor it contains. Women devotees offer the drink and meat to every male Bhakat. This sect also calls their cult *Keval dharma*. *Keval* probably refers to Śiva or Mahādev as the only God or Supreme Being. He is propitiated with cooked meat and drink which the devotees value most as food. This form of worship is said to have been introduced by the Mahantas of the Kāl Saṃhati. Rāmdev and Sunandadev are mentioned in the devotional songs as the first missionaries of this cult.

The Bhakats (devotees) of the Great Sect (*Barkheliā*) are stratified into three orders. The lowest are the *pānchnamiā* ("five names"). They recite the 'five names' of Aja Janārdana. They worship upto *Caran* (feet). The next higher order is *Coitiya* Bhakats. They are entitled to Twelve Names and they worship the Unborn one upto *Hṛidi* (heart). The word *coitiyā* is sometimes interpreted as the devotee who has attained the twelfth month *coitra*. The third or the highest order is known as *Kevali*, who attained the knowledge of the highest or the only one. The *Kevalīs* have again to pass through three stages to reach the apex of spiritual ladder and the stages are from the bottom (a) *Karaṇi* (b) *Digambari* and (c) *Kevali*.

(a) Karaṇī

The Karaṇī begins to realize the great truth. Pānchnamiyās and Coitiyās are mere novices. It is only after passing through severe test that a Coitiyā can become a *Karaṇi*. 'In a covered enclosure called *dhol-ghar* (secret Chamber) a Bhakat (or devotee of this line) who aspires to be a Karaṇī, is examined by a naked woman. All other men and women having access to this *dhol-ghar*, including the door-keepers, have to be naked. Meat, drink and other tempting eatables are placed within the *dhol-ghar*. If the aspirant can subdue his passions in the midst of so many temptations, he is then accepted as *Karaṇī* and given access to all the secret

worships and inner truth of the sect'. (vide) article by S C. Goswami, Jorhat, the 14th May, 1918, in *Reports, Assam Research Society of Kamrup Anusandhān Samiti* bound vol., 19-3-64, pp. 44-45). The caremonies performed in the *dhol-ghar* are undoubtedly a form of *pānchamakāra sādhanā* which is found in Hindu Tāntric and Buddhist Vajra-Yāna cults.

(b) *Digambarī* :

After certain observances for a number of years a *Karaṇī* becomes a *Digambarī*. A *Karaṇī* "has to remain naked in the midst of the *Bhakats* at their worship time ; but a *Digambarī* goes naked even outside the circle." (*Reports : ibid.* p. 45).

(c) *Kevalī* :

The last and the highest stage, is the *Kevalī* proper. In this stage the *Bhakat* 'becomes unconscious of everything else except the one all pervading Entity.' (*ibid.*, p. 45). *Moāmarā* and *kardoiguriā Satras* are the principal *Satras* that propagate the *Keval* cult.

In describing the origin of this system of religious worship it is sung by the devotees thus :

Haré Pārvatīr rahasya bhakati
Ehāk sār kari dharā
Pārvatī jimaté bhakati karilé
Ehar Kahu nirnay`

(from the author's collection)

Here this form of worship is called the secret worship of Hara and Pārvatī. The devotees are advised to hold fast to it with all the devotion. I tell you how Pārvatī practised it (says the above quotation).

Further it is said in the songs that when in Bhārat there was no religion Śankar (Śiva) brought down this religion from Kailās. The devotees believe that the drink which they use in the worship originally came from Heaven and is therefore ambrosia (*amṛt*). The devotees sing—

acinak cinālā akhādyak khuālā
sehihé devaré sāj
āmār bandhu savé ji dharmā acaré
cārio vedaré bāj

(from the author's collection).

This part of the song means that you have made known the unknown to us ; you have made us take a forbidden thing, that is, the drink of the gods. The religion which our friends here practise is outside of the four Vedas. The implication is that the drink (*sāj*) used was so long the exclusive enjoyment of the gods, the mortals having no

right to it. Now that Śiva has brought down from Kailās this new religion to us for our spiritual liberation the drink so long forbidden has also been brought down to us from Heaven along with it. It may be concluded that it is a Tāntric form of religion with Śankara or Śiva as the highest god representing the 'all pervading Entity' or Brahman of Vedānta.

The rites performed by the *Karaṇi* and *Digambari* are comparable to those of the *Bhoiravi Cakra* of the Tāntric worshippers at higher stages by reaching which the devotees renounce everything temporal including their apparels on the body and conventional sense of shame. *Vastrapaharaṇ* of the Gopis by Kriṣṇa is an instance of complete renunciation or freedom from all *asta pās* on the part of the devotees described in the Vaisṇava literature.

The cult of the Night Worshippers, popularly called *Rāti-khowā*, is prevalent among the Miris and Kachāris also in Assam. Those who practise this worship are called *Pakā Bhakats* because of the offerings made of cooked things (*pakā*) such as meat and drink at worship. To Mahāpurusā Bhakats these things are taboo. They make raw offerings at worship such as raw rice, gram, mug and plantains and other fruits. Hence they are called *Kecā Bhakats* *Kacā* meaning raw.

The Tai-Ahoms are thus divided between these two sects—*Kecā* and *Pakā*—with separate prayer houses (*Nām-Ghar*). Only a few Ahom families are still keeping alive their ancestral worship of *Umphā. Me-dām Mé-Phi* or the ceremony of making ablutions to the spirits of the dead ancestors has been revived as a public function recently among the Ahoms. It is held annually at a number of centres in Assam. is *Phrā-Lung worship*.

Hinduism as such was perhaps not at fault. It taught high moral principles and the means to attain spiritual truth. Evil consequences followed, if at all, from what the Ahom kings and the Hindu priesthood did without understanding their proper spheres of activity and the full implications of the new cults prevailing in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Ahom religion was one having no Sectarian cults to socially divide the Ahom, but the adoption of Hinduism as the Tai-Ahom religion in Assam led to the sectarian divisions among them, each group following its own food habits, social inhibitions and distinctive forms of worship. Though socially and religiously separate racial identity is there among the Ahoms because of the existence of the Caste System in the Hindu Society.

CHAPTER VI

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS PROPAGATING THE ESOTERIC CULTS OF NIGHT- WORSHIPPING AMONG THE TAI-AHOMS

The Gosains propagating the esoteric cults of Rāti-sevā or Rāti-khowā (Night-worshipping) belong to a religious sect called Kāl-Saṁhati or Kāl-Ghati .¹ The founder of Kāl-saṁhati was Gopal Ātā of Bhawani-pur who was a son of one Kāmeswar Bhuyan of Nācāni-ghāt in Eastern Assam. Gopāl Ātā was one of the twelve chief missionaries or apostles (*dharmācaryas*) appointed by Mādhava-deva with the task of preaching the neo-vaiṣṇava faith among the people and proselytize them.

Gopāl Ātā in his turn had twelve chief disciples who were authorized to act as apostles and religious heads to preach the religion in different parts of Eastern Assam.

The twelve apostles of Gopāl Ātā were—(1) Bar Yadumani, (2) Saru Yadumani, (3) Murāri, (4) Nārāyaṇa, (5) Sanātana, (6) Aniruddha, (7) Śrīrāma, (8) Rāmachandra, (9) Puruṣottama, (10) Rāmacaraṇa, (11) Paramānanda and (12) Daloipo Sanātana. The first six were non-Brahmins and the rest Brahmins

Of the above chief preachers Bar Yadumani's favourite disciple was Ramāi or Rāmdev. It is said that Rāmdev was the first Gosain to propagate the cult of night-worshipping in Upper Assam through his agents. It is also said to be recorded in old manuscripts that Rāmdev was a nephew of Yadumanidev. It is also in record that Rāmdev was the son of Sudarśandev and eldest grandson of Saru Kriṣṇadev (Kriṣṇadev Younger), the founder of the *Calihā Bāreghar Satra* (vide Vijayānandadev's *Carit puthi*) near Mejengā, Śibsagar. Saru Kriṣṇadev's second son was Vijayānandadev who established the Budbāri Satra. Sudarśan and his son Rāmdev became successors respectively of Saru Kriṣṇadev of Calihā Satra. The third and youngest son of Saru Kriṣṇadev, named Sunandadev, founded the Kātanipār Satra in Śibsagar. There was also one Bar

1. *Kāthāguru-carit*, Ed. by U.C. Lekhāru, Nalbāri, 1952, p. 521 ;
S.N. Sarma : *The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*,
(Gauhati University, 1966), pp. 84-85 ;
Rāmḍhenu , 5th year, No, 12, "Rāti-sevā" pp. 303-304.

Kriṣṇa (Kriṣṇa Elder), probably the elder brother of Saru Kriṣṇa, who founded the Cecā and Moirāmāri Satra. Sunandadev died issueless and the Satra had to be managed by two Sevaites named Brahma Kānāi and Śudra Kānāi. From the devotional songs it can be safely asserted that Sunandadev was one of the earliest preachers of the night-worshipping cult.

In a series of orally handed down devotional songs called *Yugut Vicār* sung by the devotees, both male and female, at the night-worshipping ceremony there is definite mention of its origin in Hara and Pārvatī. The song says—

ciniā bhakati dharā mur bāndhava
ciniā bhakati dharā
haré pārvatīr rahasya bhakati
ihāk sār kaṭi dharā

meaning—know the bhakti, my friends, and hold on to it. This secret worship Rāti-sevā with meat (*kāch*) and drink (*bhar*) offering is of Hara and Pārvatī (hence essentially a Tāntric cult) and devotees should hold fast to it. Again the song says—

rahasya thānaré rahasya bhakati
rasikāsakalé gāi
kaisé Śrī Rāmdevé śuna bandhusavé
ei ras Śankaré gāi

(probably *khāi*)

That is, it is the secret esoteric devotional worship performed at a secret place. It (i.e. worship song) is sung by the female devotees after taking the drink (*rasikā*, *ras*=drink). This cult is preached by Rāmdev, listen O' friends! Śankar (Śiva) sings this *bhakti ras* (or takes this *ras*, that is, drink).

At another place it is said “*Śrī Rāmdevé ei ras ihāpilé*” that is Rāmdev installed this drink. Devotees call this drink not *mad* but *ras*, *sāj* or *amṭ*; because it came from Heaven and introduced to the devotees by Mahādeva. A later writer Caturbhuj, who became Satrādhikār of Moirāmarā, attempted to show that Rāmdev was opposed to intoxicating drink and meat the main offerings in night-worshipping. But the Rāti-khowā devotional songs, as are sung to this day in the actual practice of the worship, contradict this. Rāti-khowā is in vogue to-day among a large section of the Ahom people of Śibsāgar and Lakhimpur districts and also among the Miris and Kachāris. Satras propagating this cult were established mostly in the sub-division of Śibsāgar in Upper Assam, but Satrādhikārs are non-Ahom, mostly high-caste Hindu Śudra Gosains.

Another name very prominent in the devotional songs of night-worshipping is Sunandadev, Satrādhikar of Kātanipār Satra. In the ceremony of Rāti-khowā a *pūrṇa bhakat* occupies the leading place. A *pūrṇa bhakat* is one who has passed through all the spiritual stages and attained perfection. When all male devotees sit in the assembly with the *pūrṇa bhakat* as the central figure with a lighted earthen lamp placed before him the female devotees, who are called *dokānī* or saleswomen, sing those songs repeating the name of Sunandadev. Thus often repeated line is—

“*koisé sunandevé śunā bandhu savé
diyā sacangaté thāi*”.

that is, so said Sunandadev, hear friends, give a place in the sacang, that is assembly of good devotees (i.e. *sat* + *Sangha* = *Sacang* = residence of a Mahanta). The female devotees address the *pūrṇa bhakat* as *pūrṇa swami* and pray that they be accepted as servants by him. They further sing—

*rasar bhānda loi Rādhār choi gopi
pūrṇak dharā jogān*

meaning six gopīs of Rādhā by carrying the pot of *bhar* or *ras* (intoxicating liquor) supply it to the *pūrṇa bhakat*, Again—

*āmi dāsīsavé ānu amṛtaka
devasavé pān karé*

that is, we the female servants bring the nectar (liquor), which is drunk by the gods.

*hé pūrṇa swami nilakṣa dokāni
pūriyo manaré kām
boikunthar parā dhāré boi āhisé
itu ras sāj nām*

that is, O’ *pūrṇa swami*, we (i.e. female devotees) are saleswomen, satisfy our mind’s desire. This *ras* or *bhar* called *sāj* has been flowing down from Voikuntha (abode of Viṣṇu).

It is clear from the internal evidence of these songs that these songs were composed by Sunandadev, who converted the original Śaiva cult into a Vaiṣṇava worship. The disciples also say so whatever may be the arguments advanced by some writers to show that Sunandadev did not propagate the Rāti-khowā cult. On the other hand it is sung—

*Śrī Sunanda devar guputar bhakati
śuddha jivai bicāri lai*

i.e. It (Rāti-khowā) is the secret bhakti cult of Śrī Sunandadev sought for by pure souls.

It is known from the disciples of respective Satras that the Gosains of Kātanipār, Moirāmarā, Jakāi, Kardoiguri, Kurekhanā and Dhoramukhiā Gajalā Satras propagate this night-worshipping cult in close secrecy. (*vide Rāmdhenu, Āshār 1883 śak, p. 303*).

It is also to be noted that Rāti-sevā has not only several stages bottom to top but also different lines such as 1. *rityā*, 2. *aritiyā*, 3. *bātibhagiā*, 4. *cāri khutiā*, and 5 *gopi-kheliā* or *gopi-dhārā*.² When enquired about the preceptor or guru who introduced this Rāti-khowā religion many names are mentioned such as four Sanyāsins, jai Śankar, jai Mādhav, Pūrṇa Śankar, Kalī Āi, Rāmdev, Śukdev, Sundardev and others. It seems a good number of Gosains were secretly propagating this Rāti-khowā religion among vast masses of the ordinary Tai-Ahom and Tribal people in Śibsāgar and Lakhimpur districts of Upper Assam. Usual Rāti-khowā forms of ritual are 1. Śalitā-loguā, 2. Dāngariā Sevā and 3. Bar Sevā in which the select group of devotees strip their persons of all apparel before they proceed to perform their worship with devotional songs and dance.

Another religious cult is that of the Mataks in Upper Assam which embraced within their fold a large number of Tai-Ahoms besides Kaivartas and Kalitās. It is said that the Mataks as well as Marāṅs constitute a distinct sect of radical Vaiṣṇavism. Among the Mataks and Marāṅs there is no distinction of castes and creeds. They are all of one religious view and practice which is partly open and partly secret. This community's life is under the control and direction of Matak Gosains who live in Satras. These Satras are—

1. Dinjoy at Chābua,
2. Garparā at Dikom,
3. Madārkhāt at Lāhowal,
4. Bagaritaliā at Dikom, and
5. Pūraṇimāti in Jorhat.

The first four Satras are in the sub-division of Dibrugarh and the fifth is in the Sub-division of Jorhat. The Mataks do not recognise the social supremacy of the Brāhmins as a priestly caste. But the Gosains propagating the Matak religion are Kāyasthas. They do not, it is said, intermarry with the Mataks and Marāṅs.

2 Viṣṇuization of Tāntric Rāti-khowā cult at a later date took the form of kṛṣṇa-Gopi cult (*rās līlā*) with different kinds of ceremonial dance such as *ḍhul Vihār, nij Vihār, Gopi-Vihār, nagā-Vihār* etc. These dances are performed by female devotees with plates on hand containing the offerings and at closing stages without them. *Vihār* means sport, pleasure or stepping as through a dance. Among night worships the chief one is called *bar sevā* in which only mature devotees can take part. See also. H. Buraguhain's *Janagitar-Svaraddhani*, P. 16.

It is noteworthy that all through the Tai-Ahom rule in Assam (Möng-Dun-Sun-Khām or a land of golden harvest or a kind of suvarṇa-bhumi) for first four hundred years since their landing in A. D. 1228 in the Brahmaputra Valley the Tai-Ahoms remained religiously and socially undivided. The religion which they brought with them and which was in force throughout this long period did not create religious sects amongst them, nor did it recognize untouchability and castes in the Hindu sense. Socially and culturally the Ahom pattern of life was integrative and not dominative ; politically and economically their system of administration was characterized by relentless discipline but in social and religious liberalism they had hardly any parallel in India. Socially no castes with rigid caste rules were created and religiously different religions, whether Hindu, Muslim or tribal, were not only tolerated but also patronized. The Tai-Ahoms fought against the Imperial Moguls many times finally eliminating that external danger, yet owing to the religious catholicity of the Ahoms the Muslims never clashed with them on grounds of religion. On the other hand, it was the sectarian developments of Hinduism within the kingdom culminating in the Moamaria revolts that undermined the Ahom power and made it an easy prey to the Burmese and the British.

Religious policy of Hsö-Tām-Lā or Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663) was primarily responsible for all that happened in the socio-religious field in later history of the kingdom. He was the first Tai-Ahom king to officially switch over to Hinduism of the Vaiṣṇava faith in the sixth year of his reign in A.D. 1654 by virtually abandoning his ancestral religion. This he did inspite of the opposition of the Ahom priesthood. From a purely spiritual and cultural point of view it might be a welcome step, but from the political point of view it was disastrous. During those days of repeated Mogul invasions the kingdom's survival depended solely on the strength of internal organization and fighting power of the nation. This again depends upon intense feeling of patriotism and physical vigour of the people built on appropriate food and drink habits. But Vaiṣṇavism was a cult opposed to this way of life. It makes the followers mentally imbecile and physically weak. Jayadhvaj Singha did not realize what it was to become a proselyte of a sectarian religion. Not only he himself became a convert, he also in his religious zeal donated large tracts of land with labour (*pāiks*) for the establishment of the principal Vaiṣṇava Satras in Upper Assam and permitted the Gosains to freely carry on their proselytizing activities. As a necessary corollary of the Vaiṣṇavite doctrine the devotees of the Vaiṣṇava Satras could not serve as soldiers and hence had to be exempted from military service. The initiated had to accept

and act according to certain inhibitions in regard to food, drink and habits of life imposed by the Vaiṣṇava Gosains.

Then came in 1662 the invasion of Assam by Mir Jumla, the great General of Aurangzeb. Jayadhvaj Singha failed to resist him and the Mogul General reached the Ahom capital Garhgaon. But Jayadhvaj's great successor Chao-Hpā Hsö-Pöng-Möng or Swargadev Chakradhvaj-Singha (1663-1669) completely wiped out the conquests of Mir Jumla and recaptured Gauhati from the enemies. Before sending his expedition to drive out the Moguls from Assam Chakradhvaj Singha held a council meeting of his three Great Gohains and other officers. Addressing them the king said—'My brother, Chao-Hpā Hsö-Tām-Lā, did not make any offering to our forefathers. He also did not offer sacrifices to Lengdon and all other gods. So the Musalmāns could come to our country and devastate the province'. (translated from Tai-Ahom text, *vide Ahom Buranji*, p. 195). Lengdon was the Lord of Heaven and War Lord wielding the Thunder (Vajra). Then the king with the Dāngariās and other officers offered sacrifices to the gods at Charāideo and then attacked and liberated Gauhati by chasing out the Moguls across the mouth of the river Mānāhā. Being infuriated at the defeat of the Mogul Faujdār at Gauhati Emperor Aurangzeb sent with a large force Rājā Rām Singha of Amber to punish the Ahoms. But at the memorable battle of Śarāighāt (March 1671) in Gauhati the Ahom General Lāchit Bar Phukan inflicted a crushing blow on Rām Singha, who then had to beat a hasty retreat out of the Ahom territory. The entire credit for it goes to Chakradhvaj Singha's policy, foresight and war preparedness in anticipation of a fresh attack after liberation of Gauhati.

Chakradhvaj Singha's successes against the mighty Moguls brought back the faith of the Ahoms in their own religion and way of life which were free from the many inhibitions of the Hindu Vaiṣṇava cult. The Tai-Ahoms were a meat-eating beer-drinking vigorous race. Yet they were of a peaceable temperament, polite, hard-working and brave people. Their great religious ceremonies were organized as State ceremonies at Charāideo on special occasions, such as war, victory or coronation under orders of the king and the Tai-Ahom Priests performed the rituals on a grand scale with animal sacrifices and invocations to gods and with oblations of meat, drink, eggs, rice, fruits and flowers. The nobles of the Royal Court and a great assembly of people attended these ceremonies. They come back inspired with the blessings from Heaven and hence confident of success. All these ceremonies were such as befit a martial race, and survival in those days was possible only through development of martial qualities. For lack of such qualities to the required degree

Bengal, under the rule of Lakshmaṇa Sena, a venerated Vaiṣṇava prince, was easily conquered by Muhammad Khilji son of Bakhtyar, towards the close of the twelfth century A.D. It is noteworthy that when Mahammad Khilji, with a party of eighteen troopers, suddenly appeared before the capital city of Nadia the Raja fled by the back door to Dacca without offering any resistance to the enemy.

Vaiṣṇavism may be a refined religion based on higher philosophy but its rules tend to enfeeble a virile nation. The Rigvedic Aryans in their early period of struggle in the Indus valley were a meat-eating and soma-drinking people who performed *Yajnas* with animal sacrifices. It appears the Vaiṣṇavic form of Hindu religion was incompatible with kingly responsibilities, for, the king has to wield the sword of necessity and protect the subjects against enemies, external and internal. Fall of the morale, physical vigour and high spirits cannot be permitted by real rulers. This was perhaps one of the reasons why later Tai-Ahom kings preferred the Śakti cult of Hinduism, if Hinduism was to be adopted at all, for it has certain similarities with Ahom religion. Vaiṣṇavism was left to the general masses of the people. With the progress of world civilization, it is hoped, slaughtering of animals and drunkenness would gradually go out of vogue.

King Hsö-khrung-Hpā or Rudra Singha (1696-1714), one of the greatest rulers of the Tai-Ahom Tung-khungiā Dynasty, brought from Bengal Kriṣṇarām Bhattācharyya Nyāyavāgish, a very learned and well-known Gosain of the Śākta line. Even the great Gadādhara Singha (Hsö-Pāt-Hpā, 1681-1696), who followed the ancestral religion, was not opposed to Tāntric Hinduism. He built the Kharā-dol and Lāngkuri dol, (probably Gotā-dol), with a tank at Charāideo and the temple of Umānanda at Gauhati. All these were centres of Tāntric worship. The Moguls suffered the last greatest defeat at the hands of Gadādhara at Gauhati and there was no more any invasion of Assam from that quarter.

The change of religion and, for the matter of that, gradual change of language from Tai-Ahom to Assamese produced certain far-reaching effects on the Ahom society. Under the Ahom religion the Ahoms remained undivided and socially a compact community. Adoption of Hinduism paved the way for their sectarian divisions which were more or less mutually exclusive. Each group has its own separate places of worship. The Śāktas and Śaivites go to Śākta and Śaiva temples, where there are such temples in the neighbourhood, and propitiate the deity by offering sacrifices of goats, ducks and pigeons. The Vaiṣṇavas

are divided into a number of sects and they are the Mahāpuruṣias of Śankardev, Kevaliās of Mādhavdev, Dāmodarias of Dāmodardev, Haridevis of Haridev and Moamariā or Māyāmariā Matak of Aniruddhadev. So far as the Ahoms are concerned there are no Kevalias and Haridevis amongst them because of the fact that these two sects were founded in the present district of Kāmrup and hence far away from the main habitat of the Ahoms in Eastern Assam. Then the Tāntric sect of Night-worshippers or Rāti-khowa, called Pakā founded by Ramdev, Sunandadev and others includes within its fold a large section of the Ahom population and many of the plains Tribals of Upper Assam. There are the Moamariā Matak sect of Lakhimpur and Śibsāgar districts founded by Aniruddhadev. The Matak as also the Marāṅs are mainly concentrated in the sub-division of Dibrugarh. Significant numbers of the Matak are racially Ahoms. Each of the above sects has its own monasteries or Nām-ghars (Prayer houses). Although some scriptures followed by these sects are common between a few of them, yet they are entirely different between the others, particularly between the Tāntrists, Vaiṣṇavites and Matak. Their liturgical formalities and oblations are also different. What is taboo for one sect is an essential offering to gods for another. Thus these sects are distinct from one another and even interdining and intermarriage between them were restricted under the sect rules though under the presentday economic pressure such restrictions are ignored to a great extent.

As a sequel to adoption of Hindu religion by the Ahom monarchs the above sectarian cults propagated by the Gosains began to spread among the Ahoms as among other communities and to the Ahoms these new cults-Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva and Śākta-gradually became their own religion. Thus beginning from the middle of the 17th century A. D. the sectarian Hinduism had become more and more the Tai-Ahom religion and the process of supplanting the Ahom religion in the Ahom society, except among a few priestly families, became complete by the end of the Ahom rule. The significant point is that the life of the rural Tai-Ahom population to-day is fully controlled by the rules and practices of these non-Ahom cults.

CHATER—VII

LAITU OR LAO-PHALĀ

(The Tai-Ahom Story of the Flood and new
Creation from a Gourd).

A story of a deluge is in record in the ancient literature of the Ahoms. The original Tai-Ahom manuscripts containing the story was entitled *Lāitu*. It was translated into Assamese by Rai Sahib Golap Chandra Barua with the help of some Deodhai Pandits (Ahom priests) and published under the title *Lāitu or-Lao-phalā* in October 1901 from Dibrugarh. G. C. Barua was appointed as Ahom Translator in 1894 by Edward Gait, the then Honorary Director of Ethnography.

It may be noted that flood stories are found in the Old Testament of the Bible (*vide* particularly *Genesis*, chapters 6-9) and in the folklores of many cultures, such as Babylonian, Greek, Indian, aboriginal, Australian and American Indian. Of these the one in the Bible and in the religious books of the Hindus will be referred to by way of illustrating parallels.

The Tai-Ahom story of the Flood is also the story of Creation anew from a gourd. The original manuscript containing the account of the great flood is hardly available now and its Assamese version out of print for long. Only one old damaged copy of the latter was lying in a public library at Gauhati. The Librarian was good enough to give me the information and make the book available for my purpose. The book—a small one both in size and content—narrates the story of the Flood using names and terminology of Hindu mythology.

The story is preceded by an invocation to God in the Tai-Ahom language. It runs thus :

Chao-nuru Chao-kāo oi

which means I pray to God above my head. Then the story begins as follows :

Towards the end of the Kali-Yuga the world was divided into innumerable countries. There were no kings to rule over them. The world fell into a state of anarchy with the consequence that men had no regard for one-another and acted as they liked. There were no peace and security among them. They became sinners and gave up the worship of the gods.

At this time two giants known as Khun-phi and Puk-phi appeared in the country called Mōng-klang (Middle country). At the sight of the giants people began to flee in different directions, but were called back by the giants by giving assurance of safety Then Khun-phi became king over them and Puk-phi remained as crown-prince. They appointed some of the chief men as their ministers and officers. Peace and order were restored in the country and the quarrels and violence of the former anarchical condition disappeared. But in the matter of religion there was a marked decline and the people discontinued worship of the gods. No-body need be worshipped. There was no god. Thus the faith in God or gods was completely undermined.

The gods became restless unable to receive any offerings from the people and approached Lengdon, the Lord of Heaven, for necessary action to restore their traditional worship, otherwise men are becoming more and more sinful and irreligious. God Lengdon then wanted to chastise them for their evil nature. He then sent down Neu-phā-phā (Garuda), the king of birds, to gulp up the human beings one by one. The appearance of the giant bird and his act of swallowing human beings created consternation among men, but the poor bird's storage capacity of the stomach being limited failed to swallow more than a few human beings out of the great numbers of them. With the loaded stomach he could not move. He was then surrounded by men and belaboured so much that he was nearly dead. Being left in that condition Neu-phā-phā slowly regained strength to go back to Lengdon and report all that had happened. Devarāj Lengdon was disappointed at the report and expelled Neu-phā-phā from the Court for his failure.

He then next sent down a ferocious lion to punish the people who were so sinful. The lion with his limited capacity to devour animals met with the same fate as the Great Bird Neu-phā-phā. Being heavily belaboured by the stout youngmen of the villages the lion with great difficulty escaped to Heaven to report the matter. The great Lengdon, the Lord of Heaven, felt humiliated at his own failure to punish the men who could so defy the gods. The loss of human life from the two visitations from Heaven could not change the hearts of men towards piety and religion.

This time Lengdon sent from Heaven a great number of snakes to attack these people with their poison. They were descending on earth like a mass of cloud. At this frightful sight the brave youngmen of the country prepared flaming braided wisps of straw and raised them up for the snakes to fall on them to be burnt to death. The smoke blinded the

snakes and many died in the flames and others dropped to the ground and were killed by the youngmen.

Being thus frustrated in his several attempts to punish the sinners Lengdon became mortified in humiliation. Next day he invited the Sun-God and ordered him to exert all his strength to dry up the earth with all its creatures. The Sun-God then sent down to earth its strongest rays. Soon the rivers, lakes and ponds dried up completely. The inhabitants suffered terribly from waterlessness and from the scorching heat of the Sun. Aquatic animals were dying and decomposing, plant kingdom became half-burnt and the land surface cracked everywhere. Many people also died for want of water to drink. Yet these people did not come back to sense to worship the gods and follow the path of righteousness. Who can correct those men whose hearts are full of sin and devoid of pious thoughts ?

Then Lengdon thought that a world with such worst sinners and irreligious people should not exist. If we fail to punish these sinners we shall not deserve the name of god. Lengdon was then determined to destroy (*Pralaya*) the world by a great deluge. He invited the gods, the chief among whom were Seng-Kāi-Phā-Then-Khām (*Kuvera*), Lāo-Khri (*Viśvakarmā*), Tai Lāng (*Yama*), Bāk-Lāng, (*Chitragupta*), Chao-Phā-Kun (*Varuṇa*) and Yā-Sing-Phā (*Sarasvati*) in an Assembly and informed them of his decision to destroy this world of wicked people after the failure of various measures to correct them. The gods agreed with Lengdon in his final decision, for the previous measures were taken by Lengdon in consultation with them. Yā-Sing-Phā suggested that before destroying the world Lengdon should invite Āi-Khāng-Khāk (*Bhek Ṛṣi*) who was then in deep-meditation in a lake in the Himalayas. He should be sent to Thao-Lip Ling (*Nārada Ṛṣi*) from whom a new creation was possible after the destruction of the world. On receiving the invitation from a messenger Āi-Khāng-Khāk appeared before the Court of Lengdon. The gods rose up in deference to the saint's presence and offered him a golden throne to sit. Devarāj Lengdon talked with him in whispers. Then Āi-Khāng-Khāk announced to every body's hearing his readiness to proceed to meet Thao-Lip-Ling for the purpose of communicating to him Lengdon's decision. Lengdon then dissolved the Assembly and with Āi-Khāng-Khāk entered his inner chamber. He made Āi-Khāng-Khāk stay in his Palace for the night. Next day the latter started for Thao-Lip-Ling's place, On reaching that place Āi-Khāng-Khāk saw Thao-Lip-Ling in his flower garden. From the gate he called the latter to his side. They both sat under a peepul tree and

Āi-Khāng-Khāk explained to Thao-Lip-Ling his mission on a promise by the latter never to divulge it before a third party. He also disclosed that the date on which the great destruction would take place was twenty-fifth *Falgun* (*Din-Chi*). He further said to Thao-Lip-Ling "Lengdon has asked you to make a raft of stones and keep it ready just in front of the door of your house. When the earth would be submerged by the great deluge all living things would go under water and die except the stone raft which would float. Lengdon has ordered you and me to be on the raft and also your spotted cow and no body else, not even your wife and children." Thao-Lip-Ling was filled with grief and almost collapsed when he learnt that he would have to leave behind his family to perish in the flood. However he cut off his attachment to everything worldly and made up his mind to act as ordered by Lengdon. Āi-Khāng-Khāk then returned to Lengdon and informed him of the delivery of the message to Thao-Lip-Ling. Thao-Lip-Ling, on his part, collected ten boulders or blocks of pillar-like stone from a nearby hill and made a raft. Thao-Lip-Ling, while engaged in making the stony raft, was thought to be a man of unsound mind by passers-by. However he made the raft and placed it in front of his door.

In the night before the fateful day Āi-Khāng-Khāk arrived at the house of Thao-Lip-Ling and the latter organised a feast to which all his relations and friends were invited. This he did as he would meet his near and dear ones no more after the great flood. Both the saints passed that night in religious discussion and by reading holy books. Thao-Lip-Ling gave no inkling of the coming cataclysm next day to his family members.

Next day at dawn Lengdon ordered god chao-Phun (*Varuṇa*) to rain hot water and flood the earth. Immediately there gathered frightening masses of clouds in the sky and rained torrentially hot water all over the earth and flooded it. Men, animals and plants all got burnt and submerged under the flood. The raft of stone alone floated about till it touched the peak of a mountain. The raft was moored, and Āi-Khāng-Khāk, Thao-Lip-Ling and the spotted cow landed there and at a selected site made their kitchen.

Infatuated by evil spirits Thao-Lip-Ling indulged in intercourse with the spotted cow resulting in the entrance of the Saint's seminal flow into the uterus.

When all creatures were destroyed through the flood Devarāj Lengdon by means of an absorbing weapon dried up the flood waters with the result that decomposed dead bodies of men and animals emitted stinking smell all around so much so that it reached the abode of the

gods. Being unable to bear it the gods complained against it before Lengdon. The latter sent down ten *lākhs* of snakes to the earth to swallow up the dead bodies. When they failed to exhaust the dead animals Lengdon sent down twenty *lākhs* of lions. The dead bodies were so numerous that the lion, too, could eat up only a fraction of them. Then Lengdon summoned Chao-Phā-Phāi (*Agni*, the fire-God) and ordered him to consume the rest of the dead bodies. Accordingly Chao-Pha Phāi came down to earth and divided itself into two parts and started burning out everything from the east and from the west. Being frightened at the sight of the advancing flames Thao-Lip-Ling killed the spotted cow by a blow with a heavy stick, tore up the belly and brought out the entrails. He then invited Āi-Khāng-Khāk and together they entered the belly of the cow for protection from the advancing fire. By opening up the womb of the cow Thao-Lip-Ling found a seed of gourd. Āi-Khāng-Khāk advised him to plant it at a suitable part of the summit of the mountain. The plant had such luxuriant growth that within a few days it covered the whole space of the peak. When this news reached Lengdon a messenger named Khun-Theu-Ren was sent down to apply manure to the gourd plant and come back and report. Khun-Theu-Ren did as directed, and reported. Lengdon then ordered the rain-bearing clouds to release light showers of rain on the plant. In time the plant bore only one gourd, but the gourd became larger and larger till it attained an immense size. Then Lengdon sent Chao-Lā-Pao to carefully guard the plant. Accordingly he came down and began to watch over it.

After a month Lengdon sent his eldest son, Āi-Phā-Lān, with a thunder-bolt (*Vijra*) to the earth saying—

“On the peak of the Tangsu mountain you will see a gourd plant in which you will find a gourd. Just rend asunder that gourd by hurling the thunderbolt at it. From it there would be a new creation” As ordered Āi-Phā-Lān came to that mountain peak and saw there the two saints Thao-Lip-Ling and Āi-Khāng-Khāk to whom he said about the purpose of his coming. Both the saints then led him to the site where the gourd was. When Āi-Phā-Lān aimed the thunderbolt at a point of the gourd a chorus of voice comes from that side entreating—“O god ! do not kill us, we have done nothing to offend you. We shall become kings on earth and rule countries and worship the gods and make offerings to them”. At this Āi-Phā-Lān aimed the weapon at another point of the gourd. Again came from that side the voice—“O Lord ! do not kill us. Being known as ‘Tai’ we shall rule the countries”. In whatever direction Āi-Phā-Lān pointed his thunderbolt similar entreaties and cries came from that side from within the gourd.

Āi-Phā-Lān was in a fix unable to carry out the order of Lengdon. Chao-Lā-Pao, who was watching this state of things, addressed Āi-Phā-Lān and said—"O Prince ! you need not worry. I am sitting on the gourd and you would hurl the *Vajra* (thunderbolt) at me. At the report of the explosion of the *Vajra* the gourd would split apart. I offer my vain mortal body for the welfare of all living beings, Āi-Phā-Lān accepted the offer. Chao-Lā-Pang took his seat on the gourd and addressed the living beings inside it as—"O living beings ! I am dedicating my material body for your liberation. You worship me once a year by offering sacrifices of cows and buffaloes and daily before you take your meal offer a share to my name on the floor. If you fail to observe this you will suffer". Having said this Chao-Lā-Pang asked Āi-Phā-Lān to do his appointed duty.

Āi-Phā-Lān then hurled the *Vajra* with great force at Chao-Lā-Pang with the result that at its thunderous report the gourd split apart and at the same time Lā-Pang's body was torn to pieces. From Chao-Lā-Pang's head a spirit shot up to Heaven and lived with the gods. From his chest an evil spirit came out and lived in a bamboo bush. From the right eye there arose the sun and from the left eye the Moon and decorated the sky. From the edge of the eye lids there began to flow nectar and from the nose came gold and silver. Fire came out from the tongue and from other parts of the body were born evil spirits.

On being burst open by the report of the thunder thousands of Tai people, the Mlecchas, the Yavanas, the Nāgās, the Mikirs and the Kachāris and such other tribes and also varieties of animals came out of the gourd. The Hindus did not come out of it. The Tai, who thus came out of the gourd, were known as Tai-Kalaṅgiā Ahoms. From the stock of the gourd appeared rice and countless other things.

In *lākni tousingā* (śak 9) the world was destroyed. In *Kāmut* (śak 20) the surface of the earth was burnt and hardened. In the year *Kāpsān* (śak 21) there was new creation from the bursting of the gourd. The Taikalangiā Ahoms settled down as agriculturists in the fertile areas of the river valleys, and the Mlecchas and the Yavanas came down to live in the plains.

Subsequently the race of the Hindus (in Ahom *kulā*) originated from Āi-Khāng-Khāk. Āi-Khāng-Khāk arose in the beginning from the navel of God. The Hindus also settled down in the plains. Food and other things that came out of the gourd were equally distributed among all by Āi-Phā-Lān. Āi-Phā-Lān went back to Heaven after advising Thao Lip-Ling and Āi-Khāng-Khāk to preach religion and principles of morality among men. In Heaven Āi-Phā-Lān reported everything to Lengdon.

Next year marking the insufficiency of living beings on earth Lengdon sent down Ai-Pha-Lan to sow there the seeds. of four species of organisms, namely, 1. those that can fly in the sky, 2. those that can dive and swim in the water, 3. those that grow from the earth and 4. those that move on the ground (*uran*, *buran*, *gajan*, *bhraman*). Āi-Phā-Lān sowed the seeds. which became the origin of the plant and animal kingdoms of the earth. Of the animal kingdom there are three species, namely, terrestrial, aquatic and winged.

For six years Thao-Lip-Ling and Āi-Khāng-Khāk regulated the lives of human communities. At the end of that period Devarāj Lengdon sent down his two grand-sons Khun-lōng (Prince-elder) and Khun-Lāi (prince younger) with a large heavenly body of nobles, consellers and common people to rule over the earth. They descended by an iron ladder. They built a city at Mōng-ri-Mōng-rām, a land without a king, and governed it. From that time onwards justice prevailed on earth.

The above story high-lighted by the universal flood of destruction, is not unique in Tai-Ahom mythology. In the Bible Noah's Ark (see genesis in the Old Testament, Chapters 6-9) is a similar story. "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earthAnd the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth." But "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations." "Make thee an ark of gopher wood", said God unto Noah. Accordingly the latter made an ark the length of which was of three hundred cubits, the breadth fifty cubits and height thirty cubits. It had three stories. Noah with his wife and his son's and sons' wives took shelter in it. God also advised Noah thus. "Of every clean beast thou shall take to thee by sevens, the male and his female: and of beasts that are not clean by two, the male and his female". Then the windows of heaven were opened and the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights causing the great flood. Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark and all other living creatures perished. After the end of hundred and forty days the waters were abated and the ark after floating about rested in the seventh month upon the mountains of Ararat of which only the tops were seen. Noah, under the command of God, came out there with his family and living animals and built an altar unto the Lord and offered burnt offerings on it. Then under the blessings of God they became fruitful and multiplied upon the earth or, in other words, a new creation began.

According to Hindu mythology a great flood occurred during the rule of the tenth Manu and everything on earth was submerged except Manu who survived. Viṣṇu warned Manu of the flood and Manu built a boat for his family and the seven sages of antiquity. Viṣṇu then assumed the form of a huge fish and holding the boat swam across the flood to reach a mountain peak. The boat touched the peak and remained there. When the flood subsided Manu, his family and the sages returned to their places. They were the only survivors after the *pralaya*. From Manu, and his family the human race is said to have again sprung. Manu being the progenitor of mankind human beings are called *mānava*.

According to the “Prādhāniḱa Rahasyam” of *Mārkaṇḁeya Purāṇa*—
Svarayā saha saṁbhūya Birinciandamajijanat/
Bibheda bhagavān Rudrastad gauryā saha viryavān// 26

Meaning Brahmā (Birinci) uniting with svarā (sarasvatī) produced an egg and powerful god Rudra in company with Gaurī split open that egg. This was done after the great destruction of the world. On the break-up of the egg (Brahmānda) there appeared the elements of new creation from which plant and animal kingdoms (*sthāvarajangamaṁ*) came into existence as from the gourd in the Tai-Ahom story.

The above stories, though mythological and Hindu, Christian or Tai, have certain features in common and these features appear to be inherent in the universal law of nature or of the manifested world. In them it is apparent that every creation after its maturity and decline in morals and good life in human society is followed by a total destruction or *pralaya* or *deluge*. Creation, preservation and destruction and fresh creation from the seeds of the former creation come in a cycle. This fundamental law of change is described in different ways in different cultures. Another common feature is that it is the wickedness of man which is responsible for bringing about the doom to all living creatures on earth. God destroys those who are incorrigibly wicked and sinful. Only the righteous and pure are delivered from the calaclysm to be progenitors of the newly created species. The same ideas is expressed in the Geeta when it says :

*Paritrāṇāya sādhanām
vināsāya ca duṣkṛtām
dharmasaṁsthāpanārthāya
saṁbhavāmi yuge-yuge*

meaning I come into being from age to age to save the righteous, to destroy the wicked and to re-establish the rule of virtue. Then begins *satya-yuga*. Destruction is not necessary if men are upright,

honest and truthful. The price of wickedness on their part is their total destruction. This fundamental idea pervades all ancient cultures. Another common characteristic is that the destructive agency is invariably a great flood or deluge which is let loose by God on the earth of living beings.

There are striking similarities between Thao-Lip-Ling's stone craft, Noah's ark and Manu's boat each resting at a mountain peak after floating over the flood. Secondly, human beings and other animals came out of the gourd after it was split open by the report of Āi-Phā-Lān's thunder. So also in the Purānic story creation started of moving animals and growing plants from the disintegration of the egg by Rudra and Gaurī. In the Tai-Ahom flood story the use of certain Hindu mythological names to identify Āi-Khāng-Khāk with Bhek ṛṣi, Thao-Lip-Ling with Nārada and Chao-Phun with Varuna is a later interpolation by the translator.

CHAPTER—VIII

THE AHOM MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

The Tai-Mao section of the great Tai race of South-east Asia originally moved westward from South-West China through upper Burma towards the Brahmaputra Valley now called Assam. They entered this valley early in the 13th Century A. D., acquired a foot-hold in the Upper part of it and steadily extended their sway over the whole of it. These Tai-Mao people, called also shāms from Burmese Shāns, eventually acquired the local name of 'Ahom' (from Ā-shām : the land of the Shāms).

Though the Hinduization of the Ahoms began as early as the 17th Century, A. D., particularly from the reign of Chao-Hpā Hsö-Tām-Lā or Swargadev Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663), who did all he could to establish the first principal Vaiṣṇava Satras or monasteries in Assam and who officially got himself initiated to Hinduism of the Vaiṣṇava faith, yet the Ahoms, though they were converted, refused to give up all their cultural heritage and faith in their religion. Even as Hindus vast majority of the Ahoms are not orthodox in their practice. The Brahmin priesthood has little to do with their social customs. For instance, they still adhere to their own marriage custom of which the formalities are different from those of the Hindus in their essential respects.

The formal ceremony of an Ahom marriage, called *Cak-lang* (Chaklang) in the Tai-Ahom language, is performed by all Ahoms as a social custom. There are instances in history of Ahoms marrying even non-Ahom girls by performing *Cak-lang*. When the Ahom king Svargadev Hsö-Rem-Hpā *alias* Rājeswar Singha (1751-1769) married the Manipuri Princess Kuranganayani he did it by performing *Cak-lang*.¹ If at times deviations are noticed they are exceptions and not the rule. In the matter of observance of social customs there was very little difference between the kings and their Tai-Ahom subjects. It was the policy of the Ahom rulers not to impose their own religious faith and social practices on the non-Ahom sections of the population of the kingdom.

1. Vide *Tungkhungia Buranji* (in original Assamese), P. 51, Ed. by S. K. Bhuyan, published by DHAS, Gauhati.

It was the custom of the Ahom monarchs to select their brides from among the seven highest noble families called in Assamese *Sāt-ghariā* (*Sāt* : seven, *ghariā* from *ghar*, house or family) Ahoms.² In addition to the Chief Queen the king may have two more consorts of noble birth and they are called *Nāng-Hpā-Doi* (*Parvatiā Kunwarī*) and *Nāng-Hpā-Rāi-dāng* (*Rāidangiā Kunwarī*). Both must be of Ahom aristocratic blood as a rule, but there are a few exceptions to it in the dynastic history of the race. Normally monogamous system of marriage prevails among the Ahoms, but polygamy is not socially banned. In fact many Ahom nobles had plurality of wives and the practice continued down to the British days.

The Ahom marriage is exogamous as between the clans. No marriage is permissible within the clan but one can marry from another clan within the community. No marriage can take place among the members of the families extending in the male line. For instance, if the bridegroom is Bargohain his bride cannot be of the same Borgohain family, because they both belong to the same Borgohain clan. The same rule applies to any other clan such as Buragohāin, Handikoi, Lāhan, Duarā and so on. But so far the community is concerned the marriage is endogamous. The Ahoms do not marry outside the community. They are, however, not orthodox in regard to this rule. Ahom marriage is not favoured within seven degrees of consanguinity of the bride, that is, if the bride be within seven degrees in descent from the common parents.

Prior to their conversion to Hinduism the Ahoms had a religion peculiar to themselves. In modern terminology it may be called Tāntric with an admixture of later Buddhism of the Mahā-yāna and Thera-Vadi schools. But Ahoms were free from the caste barriers and taboos of untouchability of the Hindus. Therefore occasional inter-marriage between the Ahoms and non-Ahom tribes and races was never looked upon as a serious transgression by the members of the Ahom community. But when the Ahoms came within the Hindu fold in the 17th century they had to act more and more in conformity with the Hindu caste rules and taboos in many vital respects in the socio-religious field, and their intermarriage and interdining with the neighbouring tribes were consequently banned by the Hindu priesthood whom they adopted.

2. These were Burāgohāin, Bargohāin, Khuntāi, Lāhan, Duarā, Dihingiā Handikoi, Chetiā and Khamun who were included at different time's among the *Sāt-Ghariās*. Before conversion to Hinduism Deodhai, Mohan, Bailung and Siring were also among the Chief of the *Sāt-Ghariās*. — from Ahom priest Nandanath Deodhai Phukan.

The customary Ahom marriage is a negotiated marriage. It is the parents and guardians who select the match for their sons or daughters of marriageable age and negotiate for marriage. Marriage is not an affair exclusively between the suitor and the girl concerned. Among the Tai-Ahoms only grown up girls are married off and after marriage the girls live in the houses of their husbands unlike the Khasi husbands of Meghālaya who, after marriage, live in the houses of their wives, a distinctive feature of the matriarchal and matrilineal system.

THE CAK-LANG CEREMONY

The origin of the Cak-lang Ceremony is traced to Lengdon's marriage with Nāng-Hun-Hpā, the eldest daughter of Ak-Kāi-Mo-Hung of the kingdom of the gods. It is related in a Tai-Ahom manuscript called *Lāi-Lit-Nāng-Hun-Hpā* that it was Lengdon who started the matrimonial negotiation by sending a Mission, headed by Ma-Lao-Khri, to the bride's father with presents of honour consisting of betel leaves and areca nuts (called also betel-nuts), clipped on both ends, and well-trimmed on two platters with stands (called *neng* in Tai and *ṣarāi* in Assamese) and beautifully covered with red towels to ask for the hand of Ak-Kāi-Mo-Hung's daughter. The load so carried is called *Sakali-bhār* or *Sodhani-bhār*.

When the Mission reached the place of Ak-Kāi-Mo-Hung in the kingdom of gods it was received with due honour by the parents and elders of the bride's family and the leader of the Mission was asked about the purpose of their visit. Ma-Lao-Khri replied thus—"Lengdon Mōng-Phi nang ru Khām lit te boi phā-nu-ru Lengdon mau-ceng rang-khām Mōng-phi Mōng-bān nāng phu mi hān Lunyāng mi dī taojān cu mau. Mau-cau maw hung cām kām jān thak-kā ailuk ning cyu Nāng-Hun-Hpā kka ao jān cyu Lengdon. Cau cu rai an nā cang yun cim le mak mo kop bau plu cung mau cau kka oi". God Mo-Lao-Khri placed one platter of honour with betel-leaves and betel-nuts before Ak-Kāi-Mo-Hung, the other before Nāng-Hpā-cau-kām-jān-Thā (bride's mother) and explained the object of their visit thus: "Lengdon, the Lord of Heaven, had sent these presents of honour requesting for the hand of Nāng-Hun-Hpā in marriage for him. Hence I am presenting this *ṣarāi*. Kindly give us your opinion on this matter". The divine Priest Mo-Hung and Kām-jān-Thā agreed to offer the bride and informed him accordingly. In due time, as appointed, the marriage was performed in conformity with the ceremony of Cak-lang.

Since that time marriage by the ceremony of *Cak-lang* has come into vogue among the Ahoms, which has continued to this day as a time-honoured custom though in many other respects they have adopted the Hindu way of life. It is, of course, not clear from the text whether Lengdon sent the Mission to ask for the hand of Nāng-Hun-Hpā for himself or his son. The Buddhist Tai people of Assam, such as Khāmtis and Itons, call marriage *poi-Aolung-mi* and the first such marriage (*poi-Aolung-mi*) was that of Cāo-lāng (Chāo-lāng), an incarnation of the Buddha. It is the Buddhistic form of marriage whose origin these people trace to Buddha. But the Ahom form of marriage was first founded by Phā-nu-ru Lengdon in the year *kā-cyeu* (*kā-chyeu*), that is, about A. D. 558 by a back calculation of the Ahom Sexagenery cycle.

The procedure followed in celebrating the Ahom marriage is in the following order:—

1. The offering of *Juran*, and auspicious pots or *Tekli*,
2. Ceremonial bathing or *noani*,
3. Ceremonial feast,
4. Ceremony of *rik-khan*,
5. *Deo-bān* ceremony,
6. Āp-Tāng or bathing with medicated water,
7. Gānthian *khundā*,
8. *Doiyan*,
9. Marriage procession,
10. *Huāguri-tolā*,
11. Sitting under the marriage pandal facing the altar made with a sacred maḍal (*mandal*),
12. Leading out the bride from her house and seated on the left side of the bridegroom.
13. To relate the family history (*Buranji*) of the bridegroom and the bride for seven generations of ancestors,
14. Performance of the *Cak-lang* ceremony,
15. Presentation of a *Hengdān* and a cloth girdle with an amulet to the bridegroom,
16. The Priest's advice to the bridegroom and the bride on conjugal life,
17. Exchange of (i) gold rings and a (ii) Silver lime-box of the silver chain,
18. *Pancāmṛta bhojan*,

19. Playing dice and cowree, and
20. Oblations to the five Deities on the bride's first entering the bed chamber of the husband.

1. *Joran*:

The Tai-Ahom word *ju-ran* (*ju*: to live, *ran*: to join) means living together. Articles of *ju-ran*, which are sent to the bride as a token of agreement to live together, consist of two earthen pots (Tai-*ing*) wedding dress and ornaments as many as seven sets if the family is rich, decorated with cotton yarn and filled with rice with a fresh mango twig having five leaves planted in each of them and four packets of pastes of black pulse called *māti-māh* (*phaseolus aconitifolius* or *radia-tus*) and turmeric. Of these packets two are of pulse and two are of turmeric. Other articles of *ju-ran* are two silver-handled pen-knives each linked with a silver lime-box of the shape of a betel-nut by a silver chain. In the absence of a lime-box a betel-nut is used. The above pots, while carried by the party, are wrapped round by beautiful napkins.

The articles are usually carried by the mother (or a related elderly woman) of the bridegroom to the bride's place accompanied by a group of near relatives and friends, both male and female, on the first day of the formal celebration of the marriage. In presence of the assembled women the bride is dressed up with the *ju-ran* apparel by the bridegroom's party. The bride is then seated on a carpet with the above two pots placed before her. Then the bridegroom's party comb and trim up the bride's hair, hold the silver-nut vertically with a gold ring round it on the head of the bride and pour scented oil over it to flow down to the head and apply vermilion mark on the forehead and the head between the parted hair. The women sing appropriate *ju-ran* songs with repeated *uluddhani* during this dressing ceremony.

While returning from the bride's place the bridegroom's party carry back with them one of the two rice pots, one pulse packet, one turmeric packet, one set of knife and lime-box and one set of dress for the bridegroom presented by the bride's parents or guardians all ceremonially touched by the bride before removing them from the bride's place.

The knife with the lime-box (or in its absence a betel-nut) must be always held in the grip by both the bridegroom and the bride till

the marriage function is over. While eating or washing the knife must be tied to the person of the bride or bridegroom during the wedding days. The belief is that such holding of the knife as a weapon is necessary to ward off evil spirits or evil effects of injurious incantations (*mantras*) by enemies.

The members of the *juran* party are treated to light refreshment by the bride's parents before they leave the bride's place after presenting the *juran* articles and performing the ceremony of dressing the bride with clothes and ornaments brought by the party. From this day the houses are illuminated and fumigated with resin.

2. *Ceremonial bathing or noani* (from Sanskrit: *Snāna: nāhān—noani*).

Ceremonial bathing or *noani* of the bride and the bridegroom at certain stages of the marriage celebration is an important feature both of the Hindu and Ahom marriages in Assam. The ceremony of marriage may continue for three to five days, but by custom three days are the rule. The first day is the day of ceremonial pouring of oil on the head of the bride or the bridegroom in the evening. In Assamese it is called *murat-tel-diā*. The oil used is some good hair oil. For the purpose of ceremonial bathing or *noani* a temporary wooden or bamboo platform is erected with a bamboo super-structure resting on four bamboo posts on four corners of the platform. It is quadrangular in shape and is called *beyi* in Assamese. The superstructure is made to resemble a temple with a dome crowned at the spire with a *kalasi* (pitcher) or a banana spadix (Assamese *kalādil*) with the tapering part upwards. In order to look auspicious banana trunks are cut in size and tied to the bamboo posts and the platform is covered with a woven carpet of banana strips or sheaths. At the centre of the platform is placed a *bar-pirū* or *tāmuli-pirā* (low rectangular wooden stool of large size) for the bride or the bridegroom to sit on for certain ceremonies before and after bath. Beneath the bathing platform are buried in the earth one fowl's egg and a pair of betel-nuts, one coin, one needle and one sickle to ward off evils. Over-head around the posts are tied strings of mango leaves representing purity and auspiciousness.

Every ceremonial bath is taken after rubbing on the body pastes of prepared earth-coloured pulse (*phaseolus radiatus*) and turmeric. The water used for the bath is brought by women folk from a river or a tank. They go in a procession to fetch water singing appropriate water-journey songs and at the landing place (*ghāt*) fill a small metal-

lic pitcher (which has a narrow neck to hold and not a handle) with water observing certain ceremonial forms such as offering a coin and betel-nut, and voicing *uluddhani* and return to the wedding place again in a procession singing songs. The procession comes straight to the main front door and with the mango leaves sprinkles waters from the pot upwards to the roof and then with the bride or the bridegroom proceeds to the *beyi* and goes round it thrice before entering it for her or his taking the bath. In this procession a *dunari* (a large cup-like brass vessel with a stand and a peaked brass cover having holes) filled with rice and a pair of betel-nut, one coin and a lighted earthen lamp placed on the rice also is carried by a young girl. The pitcher and the *dunari*, except when taken out for procession and *noani*, are always placed on the altar in its centre.

In the rest room the bride or the bridegroom sits on a mat with a carpet spread over it. A specially made large decorated pillow is placed at the back on it. Just in front is a quadrangular altar made with multicoloured figures of lotus petals drawn on it. On four corners four young banana trunks are planted with strings of auspicious mango leaves tied round it at a height of about three to four feet above the altar. The strings used are raw cotton threads from which the mango leaves with stems tied hang in a row. At the door and the gate-way such mango leaves are hung up above the height of the head.

The ceremonial bathing of the bride or the bridegroom is conducted solely by women who constantly sing *noani* or bathing songs with auspicious *uluddhani* at appropriate intervals as the procedure dictates. Then the bride or the bridegroom is duly dressed up with new clothing, her or his hair is combed and trimmed up as is the fashion, and brought to the rest room. After this the women, assembled to give the ceremonial bath, are free to go home.

3. *Ceremonial feast:*

It is the custom to offer a community feast to the members of the community (*jnāti bhoj*) both in the house of the bride and of the bridegroom during the marriage days on some day preceding the day of Cak-lang ceremony. It is offered as an oblation to the nine generations of ancestors of the bride or the bridegroom. In the bride's house it is also called 'bride-offering feast' (*kanyā-dānar bhoj*).

The present-day Ahom feasts are different from those of their ancestors. Before conversion to Hinduism an Ahom feast constituted of rice, beef, buffalo meat, pork, fowls, fish, various kinds of local vegetables and drink and eating takes place after its consecration to

their own ancestors who were believed to be watching from Heaven, for they became gods after death (*mari devatā hol*). But after conversion to Hinduism the Ahoms found that beef, buffalo meat and certain species of fish (such as *Sāl* and *Singi* fish) became taboo and hence had to be socially given up. Those Ahoms who were initiated to the *bhakti* cult of the Nava-vaiṣṇava Mahāpurusiā Sect, had, in addition, to give up the use of pork, fowls and drink.

Thus restricted in food habits the Ahoms gradually lost their old virility, initiative, and mental powers in the sphere of temporal affairs and developed the habit of undue tolerance, submissiveness and reliance more and more on personal god introduced by the preceptor than on their own inherent capacity.

The wedding feast is an essential part of the marriage celebration and is in the case of the Ahoms, noted for their ancestor worship, primarily meant for the propitiation of their ancestors. Just before the guests, sitting for the feast, start eating, the bride or the bridegroom comes out with a tray (*batā*) of betel-nuts to pay respects to them. She or he does it by placing the tray in proper form on the floor and bowing down to the congregation receiving in return blessings from all present.

4. *The ceremony of rik-khvan:*

According to the Ahom custom the ceremonies of *rik-khvan*, *deo-bān*, and *cak-lang* are performed respectively on the first, second and third day of the three-day marriage. *rik-khvan* (*rik*: call, invoke, *khvan*: duration of life, longevity) is a Tai word meaning invoking long life. In this ceremony two or three Ahom priests each holding a *jākoī* (a kind of triangular bamboo scoop with a long handle and a rope for pulling* it attached to the two front ends of the base used for catching fish) go to a nearby pond, river or a lake and on its bank worship the water-deity Khāo-Khām with betel-nuts, fowls' eggs, rice and other suitable offerings making the following prayer—

cāo kǎo oyi cāo kǎo oyi cāo kǎo oyi pu-thāo
 khām cay kum jā khāo khām cay khen
 bān chu-tāi kum jā-tai bān maw mun cām
 mlun cing khā nām khé khrang lung mā
 cāo kǎo oyi

Then by meditating god khāo-khām they will raise longevity for the bride or the bridegroom as the case may be. This they do by

catching whatever fish they can by diving into the water the fishing scoop, they carry, and pulling it up. The fish so caught is wrapped up with a piece of cloth or with a banana leaf or *kaupāt* (a wild grass with large, broad and strong leaves) and hung up over the head of the bride or the bridegroom at her or his seat by saying the prayer-'cāo nuru cāo kǎo oyi'. Next day at dawn that fish is cooked and the bride or the bridegroom is made to eat a portion of it. The ceremony for a long life, of which the fish appears to be the symbol, ends here.

5. *The Deo-bān Ceremony:*

On the second day of marriage, that is, on the day before the day of Cak-lang the ritual of *Deo-bān* (*deo*: god, *bān*: sun, also to pray, meaning perhaps the prayer to the tutelary gods above) is performed both in the house of the bride and that of the bridegroom. It is the institution of a ritual by which the tutelary deities of the Tai-Ahoms, namely, Lāng-kuri, Jān-sāi-hung, Lā-reng, Leng-don and Yā-sing-hpā are worshipped and propitiated with an offering of a platter of betel-nuts. In the bride's house the betel-nuts, sent from the bridegrooms' house, are used for this ritual. It is the custom to send to the bride's house from the bridegroom's house seven chests of betel-nuts. These chests are made of banana sheaths and the nuts contained in them are clipped at both ends. In addition to the betel-nuts the officiating priests also serve on the altar other things such as a dozen fowls' eggs, a quantity of rice (husked out from paddy dried in the sun without boiling), a quantity of rice beer, *sinkarā* flower and a dozen *thurīā tāmūl* (a betel-nut piece put inside a roll of a betel leaf piece). Another platter of betel-nuts is offered in the ritual in honour of the dead in the family.

Alternatively god Phurā is installed by lighting seven oil lamps and consecrating materials of worship in seven *dungs*, that is, receptacles of banana sheaths. In this *Deo-bān* ceremony the following hymn (*mantra*) is sung by the officiating priest:—

*Cāo nuru cāo kǎo oyi/
 khun khāo neu lāng-kuri po phi khru mé-phi
 nyeu tǎng mong bān mung khru nā//
 teu phā bā mung nyeu//
 jīm myu phun din bau mī nyā/
 ren lung tek pin cao ren klang tek pin
 cāo khun cāo nuru cāo kǎo oyi/
 cāohpā jān sāi hung ngi khrai hpra bang*

cāng khrai mau lengdon tek pin cāo ngyao
 khrai-hpā lengdon tek pin khun//
 cyu cāng dāng cām dīng rum kin lāo//
 cyu chāng dāng cām dong nāng keu phrang/
 cāo nuru cāo kāo oyi/
 phi lā beng bu teng cāo cām bā//
 lā lā lūkhvan bān lā ju chip plāo//
 myu rān lyu chip chit cān koi pang//
 kun dau bā klāo klāo//
 nāng lā chāng/
 cāo nuru cāo kāo oyi/
 caohpā phet khām khān/
 bāng khān khām tyu mōng tu té luk ré phā cāng dām/
 cāng cāo jā nāng jā nāng mau kep chāng khāng/
 cāng cāo jā nāng jā nāng mau kep chāng bun/
 pī pāi lāng lāi dāi khun phai phāi nāng lāi cām/
 cāo nuru cāo kāo oyi/
 tun ru mung len khām cāo/
 maw neu cāo phā kā ru lāi chām chip puk chip//
 puk maw ru hā chip puk chip/
 lāi ching mung tu cāo lāi ching khung tu
 khān cāo hpā khāmsing mung cāohpā pen ching mung/
 nek wā cheng tām lā cāo kka cyā nik khām/
 chu ko cyā nik ru/
 cāo nuru cāo kāo oyi/
 wān phī rik-khvan cyung mau cāo kāo oyi/
 nuk tu dām tī ren dām nuk khak cak tai
 pin dām kā chyu khrai pin phi/
 chip mau pawī pin dām cāo mau powī pin phi/
 cāo tun dām mau chāi kum ngi tung dām
 mau chāi khen cām nāi/
 cāo nuru cāo kāo oyi//
 cāo rup ju po' tāng mé tāng bāo cāo neng
 cāo kawaing cheu wā non nā/
 mak myu phu leng bau plu phu leng āi
 ān nā mā khup mā pawī/
 cāo ren mām kā kun phu bao nām luk ruk
 kun phu mām kkā kām phu wao phā nuru kun
 phu ning marang kī nāng pawī, chak
 lāng heu hit cang//

*cangphu phu mī dī pawī nāṅ tī pām āomā ren/
 nāṅ tī rāo plang chu plung heu jip
 ren jip bān cāng ren cāng khā cāng phu
 mā phu mī rak chen pin bau nu rak
 chun pī bau jāo/
 rum khrāo rum ké//
 mak khu khām kā cāi/
 cāo nuru kāo oyi/
 mé nāi bā bān di plung cu plung cu plung ceu
 pīt phā wān teu/
 lākni khā mung rūp tī rūp khāi
 rak chī lung kkā nyang hu/
 jā heu chup jā jā heu wā bān dī khen
 dī hit dī hit khen/
 mé nāi me nai bā bān di bān/
 pīt thu bān kulā/
 āo tāng nāng nā pāng khāng nā jāng/
 nāng nā pāng khāng nā phun//
 tāng mau kup tāngphā tāng mau khup tāng bun//
 āo tāng cāng khān dī mau mā theng/
 nām tāo dī tuk nāmlāi/
 mak maw puk bau pu/
 luk lao deng kām nāng khāng/
 nām lāo deng kām nāng bun ōtāng
 kup kī khāi dī cup/
 kup kī khāi dī lū lung/
 āotāng khāo cān dī lā lung/
 nu tuk teu khriṅg tuk bun hām riṅg riṅg
 hām cā cā hā pun kkā bān phī rik-khvan/
 cung mau cāo cung mau phi/
 cāo nuru cāo kāo oyi//*

The programme for Deo-bān is as follows:—

6. *Āp-tāng*:

For Deo-bān the bride or the bridegroom has to take a bath with medicated water. A big pot is filled with water and into it are thrown a bronze piece, an axe, a tiger's tooth, *bān-huṅg*, *bān-kā-luk*, *pāni-kanyet* (water thorn), *garu-kaniā*, *tinimuriā Kecumatā* (three-headed mud thrown up by earth-worm), black turmeric, *sonbaraliā* or *son-bariāl* (a kind of medicinal plant), *tang-lati* (a kind of medicinal

plant), *Singkarā phul* (flower of *singkarā* plant), *udhān-māti* (a portion of clod of earth used for supporting a cooking vessel), and *astadhātu* (eight kinds of metal—gold, silver, copper, tin, brass, iron, steel and lead). In addition to the above materials horn of a deer and a portion of buffalo horn should be mixed up, if possible. That would enhance the medicinal value of the water.

The water in the pot is then stirred with a sickle or a knife by the priest uttering a *mantra* (incantation) simultaneously. With this sanctified water the bride or the bridegroom is to take a bath on the platform before sitting for Deo-bān. This is called *Āp-tāng* (*Āp*: to wash the body, *tāng*: with all mixed). While pouring water on the body the bride or the bridegroom should stand on a sieve with a chicken pressed under it and look at a *bharan* tree luxuriant with branches and leaves, and pour the water on the head by uttering the name of Phrā Tārā.

After changing clothes she or he should take a sickle, retreat three steps and draw three sacred lines on the ground with it in the name of “Phrā Tārā”. Then she or he should leave that place saying “O’ ills and evils ! do not come hither across these lines”.

After this ceremony is over five, seven or nine venerable persons should be invited to light refreshment and when the invitees take their seats the bridegroom/bride is to kneel down and salute them.

7. *Gānthian Khundā*:

Gānthian Khundā is a ceremony performed on the second day, that is, the day before Cak-lang, after dusk by a gathering of women. *Gānthian* is a knotted plant with fragrant root. The root is pounded (*Khundā*) on a stone slab by the mother, sisters and other women by joining their hands in the act of pounding before the bride or the bridegroom who is seated. Hands joined are five or seven. The women also sing songs (called *Gānthian Khundā nām* or songs) while pounding the *Gānthian*. With the paste so made of *Gānthian* is used by the women to give *Ganthian* paint mark on the centre of the bride or bridegroom’s forehead and also on the foreheads of assembled women. The function, which is also full of fun and merriment, is then over.

8. *Doiyan-diā*:

The ceremony of *Doiyan-diā* is performed by women early at dawn on the morning of the third or wedding (cak-lang) day with

Doiyan Songs and repeated *uluddhani*. *Doi* means curdled milk and *Yan* means to apply. The bride or the bridegroom is made to sit at the threshold of her or his bed chamber. The bride's or bridegroom's mother or some elderly woman of the locality and three young immature girls participate in the ceremony. The woman holding two betel leaves with the two hands deep the upper ends in curdled milk, contained in a vessel, and annoint the arms, feet and cheeks of the bride or the bridegroom. So also the three girls do the same with betel leaves amidst *uludhvani*.

On the day of *cak-lang* both the bridegroom and the bride avoid rice meal as a rule. But they can take light repast (Assamese-*jalpān*), milk, curd and fruits. But now a days in most cases they take the usual rice meal, avoiding meat on sentimental grounds.

A well decorated gate is set up and also a pavilion on the yard (*pandal* or *rabhā*) for the guests to sit is made.

9. *Marriage procession:*

Next step is for the bridegroom to prepare for going to the bride's house where the *cak-lang* ceremony is performed. The custom is to arrange a procession of relatives and friends both men and women, with a drum party. Usually the procession is headed by a number of elephants. The elephants enhance the majesty of the procession. Bullock carts are also used. The bridegroom goes in a litter or palanquin (*dolū* in Assamese) or on an elephant or a horse. With the introduction of motor vehicles nowadays the whole procession becomes motorised. This is the fashion of the modern well-to-do families. The bridegroom with the best man goes in a car accompanied by other cars and buses carrying men and women and a band party instead of the old fashioned drum party. Even in the country side the country drum (*dhol*) is more and more replaced by the modern band and loud-speakers on all such occasions.

But well before the procession starts the invited guests are entertained with the choicest possible refreshment consisting of soft rice (*Komal cāul*), curd and molasses, replaced in the towns by varieties of sweetmeat, cakes, luchi, dāl and *bhājis*. Many guests bring marriage presents for the bridegroom.

Then the bridegroom is ceremoniously washed on the bathing platform and dressed up with the bridegroom's traditional costume. He then salutes his parents and starts for the bride's place in the

procession. By custom the parents do not accompany the bridegroom to the bride's place.

On the bride's side, in view of her permanent separation from the family, the parents and the nearest relatives give her whatever gold ornaments and sets of silk (*mugā*, *pāt* and *king-khāp*) dress and bell-metal and brass utensils they can afford. To give presents of *śūris* is not the custom of the Assamese in general and of the Ahoms in particular. The dress traditionally recommended consists of *mekhelā*, *rihā* and silk (*pāt*) or cotton *chādar*. More and more present-day Ahom girls, reading in schools and Colleges, are taking to *śūri* in the towns and townships partly because the *śūri* is comparatively cheap and partly because it is a modern fashion. This influence comes from fashionable non-Assamese high circles in Assam. In the Ahom system of marriage dowry is unknown. But the present-day gifts to the bride include in addition to the above high class furniture, bed-sheets, with quilts, pillows and laps, mosquito curtains, tea-tables, tea-sets, dressing tables, cushioned chairs, suit-cases, steel trunks and many other things of value. Thus the expenditure on the bride's side is much heavier than that of the bridegroom's side, the only relief being the absence of dowry.

In the meantime the bride is made ready for the ceremony of *cak-lang* in the evening. She is made to take the last ceremonial bath in the *beyi* with the water fetched (*Pāni-tolā*) by women from a river, tank or lake in the neighbourhood. Then she sits on her heels and the women put rice on her head. The bath is preceded by the assembled women anointing the bride affectionately with pulse (*māh*) and turmeric (*hāladhi*). At that time the related women and others who have intimate friendship make offers of wedding presents such as wearing apparel, utensils, trays and gold rings to the bride. *Mekhelā*, *chādar*, *rihā* and blouse pieces are laid in a basket (*pāsi*) which is, after the function is over, taken to the bride's chamber. All these presents are the separate personal property of the bride. After the bath the bride comes to her chamber.

At the same time meals consisting of fine rice, meat and fish curry, pulse and vegetables are prepared for the bridegrooms' party by the bride's parents or gardeans. When the party arrives with the bridegroom the latter is detained at the wedding gate for formal reception and the guests are given seats under the *pandal*. After some rest they are entertained with the prepared meals. Other guests of the bride's side are entertained with light refreshment.

At the bride's place also a well-decorated gate and a large enough *pandal* or *mandap* (temporary house-like frame with roof) are constructed for entertaining guests of both sides. At the centre is an altar with the figure of a lotus for the ceremony of cak-lang.

10. *Huāguri-tolā* or *Huag-tolā*:

Huāguri-tolā or simply *Huāg-tolā* is a function at the wedding gate of the bride's house. *Huāguri* (H' for 'S' due to phonetical peculiarity) may be analysed as follows:

Huāg or *Suāg* is from *Subhāg* or *Subhāgya* (good luck), *uri* is a variant of *uli* (uludhvani 'r' for 'l') and *tolā* (to raise, to collect), the whole expression meaning to collect luck or fortune with auspicious *uludhvani* (*uruli*). Luck is represented by the water that is collected on this occasion. When the bridegroom arrives at the gate he is led upto a *pirā* (a low flat stool) on which he stands. At that time a group of women, carrying from the bride's chamber the pot or the pitcher and the *dunari* with a flaming earthen oil lamp on it, proceeds to a river, tank or a lake in the neighbourhood by forming a procession through the gate to collect the holy water of good fortune. The bridegroom should not see the procession. Therefore at the time of passing of the procession a screen is raised up as a partition between the bridegroom and the procession till it returns and re-enters the house. The pot is usually carried by the mother of the bridegroom or some related elderly woman. Modern fashion is for the bridegroom to continue to sit inside his car till the water is fetched. He will then be led up to the *pirā* placed at the gate. At this stage women generally throw rice (*Lakṣmi*) on the person of the bridegroom as a token of hearty welcome and wishing prosperity. In recent times it has degenerated into a fun by youngsters. Now-a-days here and there marriage processions are also physically obstructed by such youngsters in order to realize money, sometimes heavy amounts, from the bridegroom thus marring the joy of the marriage party. Instead of welcomes obstructions have to be faced on the way created by elements having no social sense. This is alien to the Tai-Ahom tradition and concept of marriage.

The women, then, come out from the house to the gate carrying the holy water pot or pitcher filled with the newly brought water and the *dunari* with the flaming light on it to receive the bridegroom. The reception starts with washing the feet of the bridegroom. A small girl is generally employed to wash the feet in a wash-basin. After

this the mother of the bride or, in the absence of the mother, a related elderly woman receives the bridegroom first by sprinkling with the mango leaves the holy water of the pot on the bridegroom and then on herself. This is repeated thrice. Then the warmth of the flaming light on the *dunari* is directed towards the bridegroom with her two palms and then towards herself. This is also repeated thrice. Finally she leaves the bridegroom after giving affectionate kisses to both the cheeks. Some other members of the bride's family may also likewise receive the bridegroom. After the reception is over the mother of the bride leads the bridegroom to the *pandal* by holding the end of his *chādar* (a kind of silk scarf) on the body to the bridegroom's seat (mat with carpet on it with a pillow behind to recline) already made ready in the *pandal*. He is to sit there facing towards the east with the altar before him.

11. *Sitting under the marriage pandal facing the altar made with a sacred madal (mandal):*

The bridegroom sits facing the altar made at the centre of the *pandal* bearing the majestic figure of a lotus drawn with seven-coloured lines. It is popularly called *madal (mandal)* by the Assamese people. Seven different kinds of colour powder—white, black, blue, green, purple, red and yellow—are used to give colour to the lines. The lotus has sixteen petals of large size. At the centre there are two concentric circles, one smaller within a larger one. The space between the two circles are divided into four equal parts by four straight lines whose length is limited by the circumferences of the two circles. One large lighted earthen lamp is placed at the centre, that is, within the innermost circle with the wick pointed to the east, and four such lamps of smaller size are placed in the same position within the four parts into which the space between the inner and outer circles is divided. Then at the sixteen petal ends sixteen lamps are placed in the same manner. The remaining points for the lamps to be placed are the eighty crossing points of the petal lines. One such lamp is placed at each of these points. This lotus figure is the accepted figure illuminated with one hundred and one lamps, each containing mustard oil poured into it and a wick to burn. All the lamps, pointed to the east, are lighted just before the bridegroom takes his seat. He is to take his seat after saluting the illuminated altar.

12. *Leading out the bride from her house and seated on the left side of the bridegroom.*

The bride in her chamber remains sitting surrounded by young

girls and other women who continue to sing wedding songs and also songs called *jurā-nām* attacking the bridegroom and his bestman and young relatives.

From the bridegroom's side also similar counter-allacks are made by the party of accompanying girls on the bride's party. It is actually a battle of wits through songs between the two sides. All these attacks are taken in good humour by the persons attacked.

In the meantime the bride is dressed up exquisitely with the choicest of wedding apparel, gold ornaments and embroidered lady shoes with the hair combed and tied up into a beautiful chignon. She is thus made ready to go to the *pandal* to participate in the ceremony of *cak-lang*. But by custom she would not move unless requested by the bridegroom's side by sending a platter of betel-nuts. The elders of the bridegroom's party then send to the bride's mother, who stays inside her house, a platter of honour (*mān dharā śarūi*) with a few coins (price) asking for the bride and another such platter without coins is sent to the women attending the bride. A similar platter of honour (*śarūi* indicating *mān*) is also given to the father of the bride in the open *pandal* in presence of the assembly of guests. On accepting these platters the parents order the bride to be taken out to the *pandal* where the bridegroom is sitting alone. The bride is then with *uludhvani* conducted by the women (sometimes bodily lifted by a man who is a relative) to the *pandal*. She wears a veil covering the face and is made to sit with *uludhvani*, after salutation to the altar, on a separate carpet with a pillow behind just on the left of the bridegroom. Behind them are the women, girls mustering in strength, who sit and sing the appropriate class of wedding songs except when a function takes place. At the religious service conducted by the officiating priest the assembled women utter the auspicious *uludhvani* at intervals as required. Marriage songs have many varieties of tunes expressing the feelings of the occasions.

To the left of the bride the father or guardian of the bride sits and to his left is the officiating priest who sits facing south. The elderly relatives with knowledge of ceremonial procedure of *cak-lang* occupy the front seats to the right and left. Those who are of the bride's side sit on the left and those of the bridegroom's side sit on the right side of the bride and the bridegroom. Other guests and young people sit behind them on benches and chairs as spectators on the gallery.

When all are seated in an orderly manner another platter of betel-nuts covered with a kerchief is placed ahead in honour of the father or guardian of the bride as mentioned above. A few more platters of betel-nuts may be put forward as a token of respect for the nearest related elders of the bride's family.

13. *To relate the family history (Buranji) of the bridegroom and the bride for seven generations of ancestors:*

To relate the history (*Buranji*) of the forefathers of the bride and the bridegroom, their deeds, achievements and contributions in the service of the State upto the seventh generation just before the ceremony of *cak-lang* formally begins is a speciality of the Tai-Ahom marriage. The history is related by the Majinder (or Majumdar) Barua in the case of the king or any other competent person in the case of other people. Since the fall of the kingdom such family history of the parties has lost its significance and hence, now, only the origin and achievements of the race are related from *buranjis*.

Then a copper tray bearing the figure of a lotus and containing a large quantity of *singkarā* flower, *tanglati* (a kind of small fragrant plant with leaves of rough surface), *til* (sesamum seed) and a ghee lamp is placed near the bride and bridegroom.

14. *Performance of the Cak-lang ceremony:*

The ceremony of *cak-lang* begins with the bride and the bridegroom holding oblations of flowers and rice with folded palms and uttering the following prayer:—

*O' phrā bān nāi cak-lang cī cim
heu tim (O' God! let our marriage be happy).*

Then the oblations are thrown to the altar and simultaneously the assemblage of women utter *uludhvani*.

The person giving the bride in marriage then holds a similar oblation of flowers and rice with folded palms and utters:—

*'cāo nuru cāo kāo oyi! kāo é phun ning
phrāo jān heu tūi lāng bak lāng kā phi ko
cāng kup ko māi cāo kāo oyi'*

The next step is for the father (or guardian) of the bride to welcome the bridegroom with an offer of a set of clothes and ornaments, such as a gold ring, which he puts on the ring-finger of the latter. The ceremony is accompanied by *uludhvani*.

Then the father (or guardian) of the bride placing the bride's thumb upon the thumb of the bridegroom, both palms side down, and holding them in that position utters the *mantra* of bride offering thus—

'*cāo nuru cāo kāo oyi! bān nāi luk cāo kāo, nāng cāo kāo, pī cāo kāo, khāng nā rāi sī hāng khāng khā, yāo mau ku mau yī nu āo tā*' (O' God of Heaven! in presence of you I am offering my daughter/younger sister/elder sister/niece /grand daughter to the bridegroom. (Addressing the bridegroom)—
In presence of God I offer you my daughter /-/- /-/- keep her with love and affection.

The bridegroom gracefully accepts the bride with these words:—
'*khung lu mau cāo kāo dī dī sī hāp āo jāo! kāo hāng luk-sāo nāng-sāo pi-sāo ā-kāo lān-sāo mau-sāo dī dī sī tī wāi jāo*' (I respectfully accept your offer.
I shall keep your daughter /-/- /-/- with all love and affection.

The bride then stands up and takes a garland of flowers one hundred and one in count, with both hands from a platter. The garland may be of any variety of good flower, but a few *singkarā* flowers, supposed to be sacred, there must be in the string. *Singkarā* to the Tai-Ahoms was comparable to *tulsi* of the Hindus. The women assembled also stand holding flowers and rice on folded palms. The bride then respectfully places the garland round the neck of the bridegroom, who also stands to receive it. While placing the garland the bride addresses the bridegroom thus:—

Phu cāo pāk pāk blok khan khup tāng jān heu (*phu cao* = *Bangahar deu* in Assamese, a term used by the wife in addressing the husband. The address means '*phu cāo*, I adore you with this garland of 101 flowers of 101 ideas and choose you my husband).

She then salutes the husband. The women simultaneously raise *uludhvani* and shower the rice and flowers on the bride's head. The priest then utters blessings on the bride.

The women again become ready with flowers and rice on their folded palms. Immediately after the garlanding of the bridegroom by the bride the bridegroom takes up his garland of 101 flowers, already kept on the platter, and puts it round the neck of the bride over the veil uttering these words:—

(Lady, please accept this garland of flowers)

'nāng cāo blok khvan ru heu di'

Simultaneously the women shower on their heads flowers and rice held on their palms raising at the same time *uludhvani* resounding the whole atmosphere. The priest then blesses the bride and the bridegroom.

Then the bride and the bridegroom are joined by a towel or a napkin as a link tied at one end with the scarf (*chūdar*) of the bride and at the other end with the scarf of the bridegroom and this is called in Sanskrit *lagna granthi*. The assembly then blesses the pair with a chorus of voice wishing their happy life.

The bride and the bridegroom then make the following prayer to God holding flowers and rice on both palms joined—

*'O phrā cāo, O' Leng-don mau cāo
hāng tāng luk met khan kāo jau/
mau cāo ni lung hāng mau kāo kā cūm//
tāng lung ni loi/
mau cāo cāo khan kao cāng ā lu/
mau cāo cāng lāng nu chi khan kē khan/
mau cāo cum loi khvan cām ci cim khem sū//
O' po' kāo cāo hāng rāo/
tāng lung luk si tāng khring tāng mai hāo
pun wai tā/
ān rāo tāng lung ān mé yāng heu jūng tā//
rāo hit ā mu cang ko' khen//
tāng lung heu di cing tā/
khvan cām hāng rāo ān pé heu heng
nāng nai rāo kān lāng di nāi
hāng rāo āo mau cāo heng pé ju/
ā nāi su tāng jūo/
o' cī cim khem cāo o' po' cāo sen phā ān
rāo cāng ko' nau lāo cik pi heu phit kān tā/
o' cāo khun lung ā khu cāng do rak
kān heu tā pīn tāng di nāi oi wakta'/*

With the ending of the prayer the bridegroom and the bride would throw the oblation of flowers and rice to the central light of the altar. The women simultaneously produce *uludhvani* and shower flowers on the bridegroom and the bride.

THE AHOM MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

Then the bridegroom and the bride would again take flowers and rice into the fold of their palms and focusing the eyes on the central light would say—

*'o' phrā trā ā lang khup tâng boy mu cāo
khup tâng boy mu phi het mut hit cāng
nāi cāo kāo oyī'*/and throw the oblation of flowers and rice

at it.

The bridegroom and the bride again hold in their folded palms flowers and rice and focusing the eyes on the central light salute *dharma* praying as follows:—

*'o' phrā trā ā lang sā thu sā thu ceng
hāng boy mu cāo kāo oyī'*

Then they throw to the central light the flowers and rice.

15. *Presentation of a Hengdān and a cloth girdle with an amulet to the bridegroom:*

The bridegroom and the bride again hold in their folded palms flowers and rice looking at the lights salute the gods praying as follows:—

*'o' phrā trā ā lang ceng hun ceng bān
cāo phā phet khām boy heu cāo kao oyī'*

Then they throw to the lights the flowers and rice.

The bride's father (or guardian) then taking the sword (*Hengdān*), already kept on a platter near by, addresses the bridegroom as follows:—

*'āo khrāng nā ceng nāp cāk nāi
cām möng mau cāo luk āo*

ré wai tā'/(be capable of protecting the country, your own children and your property).

The bridegroom then accepts the sword saying:—

*kun juk kun khin tāk tyuk āo pé
phu met kun ni tāk jāng bā si
khun cām khyung bao ā kiu rāo tāk
heu khen kkā si kāo nāp cāk nāi rūp
āo jāo di kin lāo jau//*

(I promise with this sword in hand to protect the country and religion by punishing the wicked and protecting the righteous).

At this the women would shower flowers on the bridegroom and the bride with *uludhvani*.

The bride then holds on to the bridegroom a cloth girdle with an amulet saying:—

*'o' paw cāo pi nāng khung phū nāi cām
āo nung si heu pé heu āng tã'//*

These are given to the bridegroom to be invincible against enemies. The bridegroom accepts the cloth and amulet saying:—

*'āo phū nāi cām kāo sī hit phū
phuk ing sī juk phu khin tāk āo pé
bā dī kin lāo'//*

The bridegroom solemnly promises to conquer the enemies by wearing them.

Then the women would shower flowers on them with *uludhvani*.

The priest would then burn up a quantity of cotton at the flame of the central light and with the ashes put a paint mark on the foreheads of the bride and the bridegroom.

16. *The priest's (or a learned man's) advice to the bridegroom and the bride on conjugal life:*

It is called "Maw Lung bā khvām lāo". The advice is as follows:—

*pā cāi khā pi neng man pin dām sī
nu lé phā khrung phā khrung ju koi//
bā sī lit lāi cāng khāi bā/
kāp nāi cāng nāi cāng sā cāng tim/
kāo lyeng thū soi cāo mau lāo cik ku mo
ku wan lāng juk ā mo pāi hit tã//
kāo kā phu bā mū khup mū boy/
ā mu tāng lung sāng khun/
rum cup kām khen tū ī sāo lung hāi sā oi
heu ngak tāng lung kum kām mau cāo lyeng
ju hit tã/
ko mu ko bān cāo nāo bān lyeng paw cāo
mé cāo pī cāo kā khui cāo kkā lung tū kheu
khāo pun nāi cām wān mau mām thāng cen nān
kām mū tū khan cām ī nu tã/
ā khu lyu ren cām cāo lung kyu kā sā cāo
tu kā pé kā nāi/
pu sī cūkh cāo kā cāo cūkh lung ci ā mu ko//
nā khāo kū cāo cūkh lung cī ā mu ko//*

*nā khāo hum cum cum heu pā jāo nāi kiu
 kā tū pé/
 kiu cā kā cām dāi seng/
 khān cī jāo cik tāng di mā jai pé/
 pāi khvan tū ān tāng mau kā kāng lāi ti
 khan luk ū mu nāo ren kām tā/
 lāo phring pun nāi khruṅ mung khru māo hūng/
 hīu nā po mā cāo mu lāo kā pāi cu ā nāi
 khāo lung mām mām/
 kyu myu lāng sū khvan cām khām din tūn yā tā/
 lāi pu nāi tāng lung lāng pāi hit kā cām
 phān sum kāi/
 hang phra ku myu kao tā hāng pun hit di
 kā cām cāo phrā/
 hum hum loi/
 kāo ti phrā su tāng jāo khen tū ā kiu mun
 sāo sāng di heu po nāi cī cim khem sū luk
 mi mun dāi si phān sū heu po kāng rāo
 phrā hāng sū nāng dāi heng'//*

In essence it means that so long as worldly men and women remain apart they live an incomplete life. They can fulfil their mission only by being united. But when united the wife and the husband must know the art of living together without clash or friction and this depends on mutual understanding and tolerance. Lazy and indolent people can not be happy. To be happy one must do hard and productive work with a smiling face. They should be early risers, free from pride, devoted to God and lead a moral life. They should respect the parents and elders of the household. We wish God bless the married couple.

Here ends the function of the priest.

17. *Exchange of (i) gold rings and (ii) silver boxes and knives.*

After the solemn function of *cak-lang* is over the bride and the bridegroom are taken inside the house from the *pandal* the bride leading. In a specious room they are made to sit on a carpet with the *dunari*, filled with rice, before them. They are surrounded by a group of young women and men.

The bridegroom then takes off his ring from his finger and puts it inside the rice heap in the *dunari* and says to the bride:—

*'khrang rāk tāng lung kāo nāi bai bai
 ti nāi jāo thū āo nī'//*

(I have just kept here my cordial gift of love for you. Find it and take it).

The bride after she has found it would say:—

'*cum cum mé mé di káo bāp*

āo jāo'//

(I cordially accept it.)

In some cases the silver box (*temi*) and the knife (*katūri*) held by both the bridegroom and the bride are also exchanged between them through putting them into the rice in the *dunari* and the other party taking it out. This finalizes the union between the two souls.

18. *Pancāmrita bhojan:*

Then they are treated with *Pancāmrita* namely, a mixture of milk, curds, ghec, honey and sugar placed before them on a *māihāng* (dish with a stand). Even if they do not take it they should at least touch it with fingers. Marriage formalities end here.

19. *Playing dice and cowrie:*

It is said that the next step was for the couple to play a game of dice and cowrie (a small shell formerly used as money). But it is out of vogue now in the Ahom Society.

20. *Oblations to five deities:*

Then the bride and the bridegroom would salute on their knees the bride's parents and start for the bridegroom's house with the procession in its return journey. The bride goes in a *dolā* (palanquin) if a car is not available. The bridegroom can mount an elephant or a horse in the absence of a car. The bride and the bridegroom should not be made to walk though the accompanying men and women have to walk in the procession.

When the married couple arrives bridegroom's home (a new home for the bride) it is given a warm reception at the gate by the parents and relatives of the bridegroom with auspicious *uludhvani*.

Then on first entering the husband's bed chamber the couple propitiates the five deities, namely, Lāng-kuri, Lā-reng, Jān-Sāi-hung, Lengdon, and Jā-Sing-hpā by offering a platter of betel-nuts and lighting a lamp and praying for granting a happy and peaceful life.

The husband with his newly married wife visits for the first time, on invitation, the father-in law's house on the eighth day after the marriage. There a small feast is arranged in honour of the bridegroom. The bride after separation from her family also gets a chance after a short interval of eight days to enjoy the company of her parents' family. This auspicious entertainment is called *Āth-mongolā*.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

'C' in Tai-Ahom texts is to be pronounced 'si', not 'ki', e.g. 'cāo' is 'São', not 'Kāo'. For 'chi' 'si' is used. The second point to be noted is that the Tai-Ahom words are mono-syllabic, but poly-tonic, that is, according to the tone used in expression each word gives different meanings. Otherwise from the point of grammar the language is simple.

In the Ahom marriage there is no *homa* ceremony, nor is there the ritual of *saptapadī*, the two most essential features of a Hindu marriage. The Hindu marriage is a sacrament while the Ahom marriage is a social duty, its binding being social and mutual, not contractual, between the wife and the husband. Like the Hindu marriage the Ahom marriage is not conceived as indissoluble life after life.

The ritualistic part of the Ahom marriage is curiously enough a mixture of ancient Tai-Ahom, Buddhistic and Hindu formalities. The ceremonies of *rik-khvan*, *deo-bān*, *āp-tāng*, the relating of *Buranji*, presentation of *Hengdān*, exchange of gold rings, lime box and knife, oblations to the five deities are definitely Tai-Ahom. *Cāk-lang* is typically Tai-Ahom, but the lotus-circle with one hundred and one lights appears to be Buddhistic. The central large light in the circle symbolizes the radiant Dhyāni Buddha (*Phrā*) Amitābha or Avalokiteśvara surrounded by the Bodhi-satvas. The lotus figure represents the lotus of the heart which is at the root of the meditation of the Dhyani Buddha.¹ The very first prayer under *Cak-lang* (14) has clear mention of *cak-lang* in the first line meaning the Ahom form of marriage and in the last two prayers under *cak-lang* there is mention of 'O' *phrā trā ālang* meaning we salute *phrā* (Buddha) *tra* (Dhamma) and *ālang* (Sangha) in the first lines. Thus there is clear evidence of Buddhistic influence in the Ahom form of marriage, the central light representing the Buddha (*phrā*), and the other hundred lights representing the Sangha of Bodhi-satvas.

But the Hindu ceremonial bath and *uludhvani* entered as formalities into the Ahom marriage system. Most of the marriage songs also give evidence of Hindu influence. As the Tai-Ahoms migrated to the South through different cultural regions their culture absorbed many elements of foreign culture in the new lands which they conquered and adopted as their own. It is typical of any other race in history.

1. Presidential address of K. D. Bargohain at the first All Assam Buddhist conference in *Asomat Baudha Dharma*, published by K. Buragohain (Jorhat 1946) p. 9.

2. *Vide Deodhai Assam Buranji*, (D. H. A. S., 1932) p. 136.

CHAPTER IX

THE BURIAL CUSTOM OF THE TAI-AHOMS

The Tai-Ahoms bury their dead, but now under Hindu influence they cremate. The burial custom still prevails among the priestly classes of the race such as Ma-Chāi, Ma-hung and Ma-plang called respectively in Assamese Deodhāi, Mohan and Bāilung. Even among Deodhāis some sections, such as those of Morābazār of Sibsāgar, have taken to cremating their dead. But the Cāo-dāng¹ clan of the Ahoms still stick to the old Ahom customs including the custom of burying their dead.

The change from burial to cremation, a Hindu practice, was enforced by the Bar-Rajā (king over king) Phuleśvarī,² the non-Ahom wife of Hsō-Tān-Hpā or Siva-Singha (A.D. 1714-1744), a deviation from the Ahom royal marriage custom. Phuleśvarī whose earlier name was Phulmatī,³ was an attractive dancing girl before marriage. She was a fanatical disciple of the Śākta priest Kriṣṇarām Bhattāchāryya of Bengal, popularly known as Parvatīyā Gosāin in Assam. The genesis of the well-known Moāmariyā rebellion, that undermined the Ahom rule in Assam, is traced to the foolish religious policy of Phulesvāri.

The death of an Ahom king or Svargadev is kept a close secret till his successor is selected from among the Royal Houses by the nobles (Dāngariās) of the Court. Immediately on making the news of the death officially public the new king is placed on the throne with all the formalities and grandeur. In this way the continuity of the rule is maintained and no tangible gap or interval is allowed to exist without king on the throne. On rare occasions in the absence of a suitable prince the State affairs are managed by the Council of Ministers for an interregnum.

It is the new king who can order a coffin to be made for the dead body of the king to be buried. So long the king is alive in his death bed without any hope of survival a religious ceremony called *Dām-Lāo-Dām Phi* is performed to cut short the period of suffering

1. Cāo-dāng (*pron. Chāo-dāng*) is an Ahom clan who acted as executioners and armed guards of the Ahom capital Garhgāon.

2. Tungkhungīā Buranji (*original*) ed. by S. K. Bhuyan, published by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, 1932, p. 38.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

and the members of the fourteen clans including the three royal priests, namely, Ma-chāi, Ma-hung and Ma-plang and three Ministers or Dāngariās of the king, namely, the Cāo⁴-phrang-mōng (Burā Gohain), Cāo-thāo-lung (Bar Gohāin) and Cāo-Cheng-Lōng (Barpātra Gohāin) are treated with a feast for which fowls, pigs, goats and cows are killed.

When the king is about to die he is not immediately brought out from inside the palace or the house in which he happens to live temporarily. A raised platform is made, generally of bamboo, on the north-east side of the palace within the compound with a drain underneath for water to flow out. The dead body is then brought out and placed in a sitting posture on the platform. It is then called *Tai-cé* (pron. *Tai-cho*, *tai* : dead, *ce*, wash, to be wet), the body to be washed. A fowl's⁵ egg (*khrai*) is then broken by striking it on the forehead of the dead body to drive out evil spirits (*khé*).

The body is first anointed with pulse (black variety called *māti-māh*) and turmeric and then washed with seven or nine pitchers of water poured on the head and wiped with a towel. At that time an old man of the Lukhurākhan (Tai *luk-khā khun*, pron. *Luk-khrā-khun*) clan sits close to the feet of the dead king and gets engaged in washing his feet. It is called in Assamese "*perengani kubuā*," a queer expression. This old man volunteers to go into the grave with the dead king. To be buried with the king is regarded as a special privilege by him. Such persons of that particular clan are always available. In the latter period of the Ahom rule the man of the Lukhurākhan family was replaced by a fowl which is tied near the feet of the dead body at the time of washing it and then buried alive with it. This practice is still prevalent among the priestly sections of the Ahoms. It is said that the dead bodies of the kings were customarily washed with the waters of the *Śa-dhuā-pukhuri*, (*śa*-dead body, *dhuā* : wash, *pukhuri* : tank), a tank on the side of road to Charāi-deu from Garhgāon.

Before the dead body is taken to the royal cemetery from the palace compound the earthen posts⁵ of the family kitchen are removed to the courtyard and properly set up for cooking. A fowl is killed and cooked with green vegetables such as *lāi-sāk* (brassica) without

4. C. pron. Ch :

5. These posts of earth called *udhān*, which are one to two feet high and about three feet in circumference, support the cooking vessels, cooking being done with fire-wood kindled below them.

oil and salt. In an earthen vessel separately fine rice of the measure of five *muthis* (about $\frac{1}{4}$ th of a seer) is boiled. This cooked food is taken to the dead king sitting on the platform in a plate and shown to him. After placing before him the food is thrown away. Nobody takes it.

When the cooking of the food goes on some people are engaged in making the coffin of required size. It is made of planks of a timber called *uriām*. The coffin in Tai is called *tang-phāi*. It is dyed with red and Yellow paint (*hengul* and *hāitāl*) and decorated with melted gold. Inside the coffin a bed of quilt, carpet and pillow is spread with royal garments placed on it for use. The king's dead body is then laid to rest in the coffin and is covered with a lid. An all-white cloth is then spread as pall over the coffin.

THE ROYAL CEMETARY

The earliest capital of the Ahom kings was at well-known Carāideu in the district of Sibsāgar. It was first established by Hsö-kā-Hpā, the first Ahom king and founder of the Ahom dynasty in the Brahmaputra Valley in the 13th century A.D. There at Carāideu was the royal cemetery on a part of the wide level ground not far from the palace. Though the capital was later shifted from time to time to other places, such as Saraguā, Garhgāon, Rangpur and Jorhat yet most of the royal dead bodies were entombed at the Carāideu cemetery. Even the bodies of many nobles of higher rank were buried at Carāideu, It is noteworthy that the severed heads of Muslim heroes like Turbak Khān and Husain Khān, who invaded the Ahom Kingdom during Hsö-Hum-Mōng's reign (1497-1539) and got killed, had the honour of being buried at Carāideu with two *moidāms* (tumuli) made on their graves. ⁶ From Bihubar to Mathurapur there were about one thousand to twelve hundred *maidāms* in rows. ⁷

FUNERAL PROCESSION

Before the funeral procession starts for Carāideu some persons are sent ahead to select and clear the ground for the royal grave. These persons select the spot for digging the grave and pay its price by

6. *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, ed. by S. K. Bhuyan, publish by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, Gauhati, 1932, p. 32.

7. Lila Gogoi ; *Buranje paraśā nagar*. Sibsāgar, 1657, p. 48.

scattering on it a handful of gold and silver pieces that they carry with them. Then they purify the spot by uttering the prayer - "*phā ting ting lai-phā lai bet*" and start the digging.

In the meantime the funeral procession starts from the palace. The bier, a bamboo framework (*cāngi*) to carry the coffin, is borne on the shoulders by members of the Gharphaliā clan towards the head and by members of the Lukhurakhan clan towards the feet. Before the coffin is lifted by the bearers the members of the royal household, led by the Chief Queen, come and salute the dead body. The bier is taken out from the palace compound not by the main gate but by some new opening made in a corner of the compound. The funeral procession proceeds along the highway with all the royal grandeur and formalities as if the king is alive. Everybody on the way must pay obeisance to the deceased king.

All the attendants of the king, male and female, with the body-guard holding the *heng-dān* (a short decorated sword of honour for Ministers and Generals offered at an investiture ceremony by the Svargadeu) walk by the side of the coffin in proper order.

There may be a host of attendants varying in number from king to king but the following ten are indispensable and must accompany the funeral procession :-

1. Hengdān-dharā — The holder of the sword called in Tai *hengdān*. He is the king's body-guard
2. Cāng-māi rāndhani — The royal cook.
3. Tāmuli—The attendant who prepares and serves betel-nut to the king.
4. Pācani — The royal messenger of the household.
5. Gācuā Ligorī — Personal female attendant, specially in matters of dress and toilets.
6. Ligorā — The waiter or male personal attendant.
7. Dhuākhuādhārā — The holder of the tobacco-pipe or *hookā*.
8. Cunwar-dharā — The holder of the whisk made of the hairs on the tail of a yak.
9. Jarā-dharā — The holder of the water pot with a spout.
10. Pīkdān-dharā — The holder of the spittoon. "

They are to serve the dead king, at least in theory, even in the grave. The dead king is regarded as living till entombed. If any subject of the king makes a complaint to the king in the coffin on its way to the cemetery the reply given by the coffin-bearers or the attendants is tantamount to king's order and nobody can violate it. "

8. *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, Ed. by Bhuyan, (DIHAS), 1932, p. 143.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

MAIDĀM

Persons that are sent ahead dig a grave at Carāideu. The grave with a huge mound of earth on it is called *maidām*. (or *maitām*), from Tai *Phrāng māi dām* i. e. *phrāng māi* to put into the grave, to bury, *dām* : the spirit of the dead. After the physical death the spirit is supposed to live and is worshipped by the descendants for inspiration and blessing Hence *maidām* is a sacred mausoleum. In Egypt as early as third millennium B. C. each monarch built his own pyramid with a hollow chamber inside to preserve his mummified body for eternity. Ahom *maidāms* are comparable to these pyramids except in structure. The pyramids were made of stone with polygonal or square base having triangular sides meeting at the apex, while the *maidāms* are dome-shaped and of earth with a sepulchral chamber in the underground vault where stones and bricks are used as building materials.

The particular road along which the dead body of the Ahom king is carried to the royal cemetery at Carāideu is called *Śa nīā āli* (i. e. deadbody-carry-road) which means the road along which the king's dead body is carried. It is traditionally known that the king's dead body is not buried soon after his death. It is first embalmed and then made to lie in State for a number of days in a specially built city called the city for preserving royal dead bodies (*sa thuā nagar*) before burial. ¹⁰

Officers were appointed by the government to look after the *maidāms*. Under these officers were placed *maidamiyā paiks* who were posted to guard the area regarded as sacred and to keep the *maidāms* well trimmed and cleared of jungles. There was also a priest called Ma-chāi Phukan (Deodhai Phukan) to make daily offerings with illumination in worship of the spirits of the dead kings and queens, princes and princesses. He had also the duty to beautify the area with flower gardens all around the grave-yard. ¹¹

It is noteworthy that hundreds of *maidāms* are still there standing like so many hillocks in systematic rows, one row after the other, from the tank of Lengibar to Nimanā Garh, a distance of about five to six miles.

Of these *maidāms* those from the *deo-śāl* (sacrificial altar) of Dole Bagan (Dole Tea Estate) to the east are of the kings and princes and, those to the west, of the queens and princesses, that is,

10. *Cāngrung Phukanar Buranji*. part I, Ed. by B. C. Handiqui and published by T. Rājkonwar, Saru Mathurapur. p. IV.

11. *Ibid.*, p. V.

on the eastern side the males and on the western the females were entombed. ¹² This whole area is known as the Great Royal Cemetery at Carāideu.

Every *maidām* has its vault or an underground chamber with an arched roof and a door. It has several compartments one upon another. Some Chambers have one story above the floor, others two with steps to mount to upper stories. The whole structure is made of stones and bricks the cement (*karāl*) being prepared from black pulse, molasses, fowls, eggs sheat-fish (*barāli māch*) and lime, obtained from lime-stone and snail shells, as main ingredients. To give an idea of the size of the chamber it may be mentioned, as an instance, that king Śiva Singha's *maidām* had an underground chamber measuring 12 cubits in length 10 cubits in breath and 14 cubits in height. The thickness of the walls is of several cubits. Hence the chamber is a most powerful structure not yielding to an enormous mound of earth above it. ¹³

All *maidāms* are not of equal size. King Gadādhar Singha's *maidam* is said to be the biggest of all with a height of about 60 cubits above ground. ¹⁴ It is of a giant size occupying about 4 *purās* of land. Other *maidāms* vary in height from thirty to forty cubits.

There is a graphic description of the orderly arrangements in which the king's gold and silver utensils, silver platters and trays mounted on stands (*Śarāi, bata, māihāng* etc.) with food and other articles, the royal *hengdān* (half sword) and the long sword, attendants, ten or twelve or more, and the bed-stead with quilt, silver mat and the pillow decorated with gold embroidery and precious stones, are placed in the sepulchral chamber (*Pāt-Ghar*) as if the Svargadev is alive. The practice of giving living human attendants, both male and female, to be buried with the dead king was abolished by king Rudra Singha as advised by his father, the deceased king Gadadhar Singha, in a dream. ¹⁵

It may take sometimes three to four months to complete the work of making a *maidām*. A large number of *pāiks* work at it under the direction and supervision of Cāng-rung Phukan, who may be called the Superintending Engineer of those days. He was one of the nine Phukans of the highest rank. The workers are supplied with rations by the Government.

12. *Ibid.*, p. III.

13. *Ibid.*, p. I.

14. L. Gogoi : *Buranjje Paraśā Nagar*, (1939, Sibsāgar,) p. 49

15. *Asamar Khanda Buranji*, Compiled from old MSS by T. C. Saikia (Jorhat, 1971), p. 15

When the Chamber, as described above, becomes ready the royal coffin is brought from the platform to the grave and placed on the bed set in the Chamber, attendants taking their proper positions by the side of the king as in the Palace. Then after rendering formal obeisance to the Chāo-Hpā (Svargadev) all, who entered the grave, come out except the man of the Lukhurākhan (*Luk-khā-khun* in Tai) clan and the attendants and close the door.¹⁶ After that the maidām workers raise earth from all sides with hoes for many days to make the mound over the grave. The mound with the underground structure is a tumulus called in Tai-Ahom *Maidām*

The old burial practice with slight modification prevails today among the Cāo-dāngs and priestly classes. It is as follows — When a man dies the dead body is immediately brought out of the house to the front yard, not necessarily before his last breath, and laid on a bamboo mat with face upward and the head pointing to the north-east. It is then covered with a white cloth. If there is delay by a few hours to carry it to the burial ground a clod of earth is placed on the chest over the cloth as a token of burial. Then on one corner of the compound a space is cleaned up and the dead body with the mat and the covering is taken over there. It is then anointed with pulse (*māti māh*) and turmeric paste and washed with water. The washing is usually done by rubbing the body with a wet cloth. After the washing each of the relations and friends, who assemble there, reverentially spreads on the dead body a piece of white cloth which he brings for the purpose. Coloured borders of these cloths, if any, are cut off before laying them on the dead body.

When the ceremony of cloth offering is over the ceremony of *Lakhimi rakhā* is performed. If the deceased person is male three packets with paddy straw are made with three paddy seeds put in one packet, five in the second packet and seven in the Third. Packets are made within the house. They are brought to the side of the dead body in a winnowing-fan, and an elderly person of the locality, holding one packet in his hand, takes out the right hand of the dead person and rubs it on the palm uttering—“*Lakhimi loi nejābā’ eri Thoi joā*” i. e. “do not take away the goddess of wealth, leave her here and go.” In

16. It is said that those who are left in the grave are said to be ‘*bar neucā joā*’ and those coming out of the grave never look back to the maidām. Those inside the grave come out after an interval by opening the door which is then closed finally. But this account is not found in any extant record. The truth of it requires further investigation.

this way he rubs on the dead person's palm the other two packets also one after another uttering the same words of request. Then the hand is pushed inside the cover and the packets are brought into the house in the same winnowing-fan and kept carefully at a safe corner of it. If the deceased is a woman then instead of paddy seeds cotton seeds are used signifying thereby that the man is to produce food and the woman clothes.

At the ceremony of *Tilani*, which comes off on the third day of the occurrence of death, the straw packets are opened before the invited guests. If the paddy seeds are found to fall short of the original number the interpretation is that the spirit of the deceased took away *Lakhimi*, in consequence of which the family's prosperity or material condition will fall; if the number remains the same the family's condition will remain the same; and if the number happens to exceed the original number the family will rise in prosperity.

On the burial ground near some neighbouring forest a grave is excavated sufficient for the size of the dead body and rectangular in shape. It is made chest deep in the north-easterly and south-westerly direction. Six planks of *Uriyām* wood or, in its absence, planks of mango tree are prepared to make a coffin in the grave. One plank is laid at the base, two planks fixed on the sides vertically lengthwise and two vertically on two ends. A fresh earthen pot, filled with water, is placed by the side of the grave. Then with a mango twig, drenched with the water of the pot carried to the place, the coffin (*perā*) in the grave is washed by softly sweeping it from one end to the other several times.

FUNERAL PROCESSION

After the ceremony of *lakhimi rakhā* is over the dead body is carried to the burial ground on a bamboo *cāngi* by four persons, generally near relatives, through an unused corner of the compound, by cutting out a route, led by a flaming bamboo torch-bearer, who is a son or a related person of the deceased. The torch-bearer drops at regular intervals on the way cut fringes of cotton cloth, or, in their absence, cotton pieces. On reaching the burial spot the bearers keep the dead body near the grave.

THE CEREMONY OF ĀYUS TOLĀ

Then follows the ceremony of *āyus tolā* performed by an Ahom priest (*Deodhāi*). It means literally—'lifting longevily'. The *Deodhāi* ties a fowl's egg with one end of an Assamese napkin (*gāmochā*)

and, standing on the edge of the grave, lowers it to the bottom of it holding the opposite end of the napkin. When the egg reaches the bottom of the grave he would say—"Well so and so! (uttering the name of a person assembled there) this house belongs to so and so (the dead person's name to be uttered). If you are here or are lying down, come up to the bank." He then lifts the egg up and as he lets it touch the ground he would produce a kissing sound thrice with his lips (*chupahi marā*). This process should be repeated thrice. This is one complete act of *āyus tolā*. This act of *āyus tolā* should be repeated as many times as there are persons present in the gathering in the name of a different person at each time.

When this ceremony is over the Deodhāi, who does the *āyus tolā*, takes a fowl's egg in his right hand lowered, stands on the edge of the grave and releases the egg to drop to the centre of the base plank of the coffin. If the egg is broken then the deceased had no more life, but if it remains intact then the death was premature.

THE BURIAL

Four persons then lift the dead body with the *cāngi* and go round the grave led by the torch bearer three, five or seven times according to seniority of age of the deceased. The torch bearer is to point the torch towards the grave at every corner himself never looking at the grave. The bamboo torch is thrown away after completing the circumambulations. Then the dead body is removed to the grave and laid to rest in the coffin with face upward and the head pointing to the north-east (*isān-koṇ*). It is then covered with the remaining plank which serves as the lid. The burial workers then spread over it a lair of split bamboos. There after every body present would take in his hand a clod of earth and be ready for the last rite of burying the dead. At this moment the above Deodhāi priest or, in his absence, some leading elderly person would announce on behalf of all to the spirit of the deceased thus: "We give you this house. You have gone either at the end of your life or are taken forcibly by the Almighty. Give up your affection and attachment henceforth towards your wife and children and near and dear ones. Let you live in peace". When the announcement is over everybody would throw to the grave the clod of earth he holds and thus the grave is filled up with earth. Then the workers cut out more earth from around the grave with hoes till a high mound is raised. A mound should be at least six feet in height, if not more. This is how a typical maidām of a common man is made.

A bell-metal cup (*bāti*) is perforated at the bottom and placed on the apex of the maidām with a knife (*naluā* or *dāp kutāri*) by its side. The family members would also offer meal and meat to the spirit of the dead. A finely woven bamboo basket (*kharāhi*) containing cooked rice and curry prepared of pules (*māti māh* or *L. radiatus*) and a whole chicken as such is also placed on the maidām. All these offerings are covered with leafy branches of trees so that they might not be upset or scattered by birds and animals. Towards the feet of the dead body a young uprooted banana tree of a variety, called in Assam *bhim kal* or *āthiā kal* is planted close to the maidām. The maidām is then fenced round with split bamboos enclosing the banana tree to protect it from animals. The graveyard fencing is not woven according to the set pattern. The weaving is unsystematic.

The *maidām* workers, after the work is finished, remove the handles of the hoes and throw them there, only the iron hoes are taken home. Some times each of them prepares a roll of betel-leaf with a piece of split nut put inside it and places it near the banana tree as an offering to the deceased. The earthen pot, in which water was brought, is also left there with its bottom perforated. They also scatter on the maidām a quantity of sesamum seeds (*till*) which it is the custom to take to the burial ground from the dead man's house. But when from these seeds sesamum plants grow and bear fruits nobody uses them.

The people who do the burial then utter blessings to the deceased and return home from the burial ground. On the way each one has to take a bath at a way side tank or a river with his clothes thoroughly immersed in the water before entering the compound of his house. He is to stop at the gate where a bundle of paddy straw, a stone roller and a light or nowadays a match is kept on the ground. He is to place the stone roller on the bundle of straw and kindle the straw. After warming the body in the flame he is to walk over it and enter his house and change his wet clothes for dry ones.

THE CEREMONY OF *TILANI*

On the third day with effect from the date of death of the person, a ceremony called *Tilani* is performed in the forenoon in the open yard of the house. Unfried rice flour, ripe bananas of the variety called locally *bhim kal* or *āthiā kal*, molasses and unboiled cow's milk are the offerings to the spirit of the dead with which the invited guests called *bhakats* (devotees), are entertained.

A thoroughly washed bowl of brass if filled with water to which mustard oil and sesamum seeds are added. Three paddy seeds, of which the husks are removed by finger nails, are also dropped into it. This mixture is called *tel-pāni*. Then a twig of a plant called *marāṅ Phul* (a kind of basil) in *Tai-Viw-Phiw* is dropped into the bowl.

A copper piece or a copper-coin, held at the cleft end of a long piece of split bamboo, is heated in the flame of a burning bundle of bamboo pieces and, by uttering a mystic formula, dipped in the water of the bowl. This way of heating the copper piece and dipping it in the water is repeated thrice. The metal piece is then removed and dropped in the water.

Food articles offered at the ritual are arranged in the yard in the following manner.

- (1) A bamboo basket, called *dali pāsi* containing the rice flour, is placed on a banana leaf cut to size and spread on the floor covering the flour with another piece of banana leaf,
- (2) The bananas are placed in the same manner, and
- (3) The milk in a large brass vessel called *jakā* which is again placed on a banana leaf. The guests coming to the ceremony *also* bring their contributions of such milk and add to the quantity already in the *jakā*.

Then the guests would sit round on mats and the priest would sanctify the offerings by sprinkling the waters of the bowl thrice over them with the twig of the *marāṅ phul* plant. He would then approach the guests (*bhakats*) one by one by holding the water bowl. Everyone would touch the water with his left hand fingers and lightly rub it on both the palms and hands and feet, not on the face. This is to symbolically purify himself. When all have touched the water in the yard the bowl is taken inside the house where the women-folk would touch and rub the water on the limbs in the same manner. Thereafter rooms of the dwelling houses are sanctified by sprinkling the remaining part of the water with the same *marāṅ phul* twig. But the sprinkled water is not to fall on rice or paddy kept inside the house.

When sanctification is over the sitting guests bless the family saying—'The house is impure, the doors are impure, to-day they are purified with sanctified water and oil, we wish happiness to all members of the household'. These words are uttered with a raised voice by the leading guest on behalf of the assembly. Then after eating the guests disperse. Upto this day the members of the family live on fruits.

Daily offering to the spirit of the dead

From the next day after the occurrence of death the family members are to offer first share of the evening meal (rice, curry etc.) they cook, to the spirit of the dead at the spot on which the dead body was washed in the compound. Such meals are offered every evening till the tenth day including in the count the date of death.

THE CEREMONY OF MARĀ LAG LAGUVĀ

This is the ritual of bringing the deceased to the company of the ancestors in the spirit world. It is done through a feast arranged on the courtyard of the house during day time. The feast is to be given on the tenth day from the death or, if inconvenient, on any other day within one month, From *tilani* to this day the family members take cooked meals from which meat and fish are excluded. In the feast for the first time fish is served and the members of the family also may take meat diet and use drink from that day.

When the guests sit at the feast dishes containing all varieties of preparations are also offered to the spirits of the ancestors of the family for several generations upward as their shares on the north-eastern corner of the yard which is called *marāmuā* (direction of the dead). Dishes used are of *kau-pāt* (a kind of wild grass with large, broad, strong leaves) on such occasions. In its absence banana leaves are used. After the guests have eaten, the dishes of the ancestors are thrown away. This food, being the ancestors' shares, is not taken by anybody. It is not the practice for the guests to offer blessings to the family before their dispersal. The guests invited for this feast are limited to the near relations and persons who attended the burial.¹⁷

17. An old Tai-Ahom manuscript entitled *Lāo-Phurā* in possession of Amulya Phukan of Chāring Deodhāi village of Sibsagar says that on the tenth day *Khāo-khām* (or *topolā bhāt* i. e. rice cooked in vapour and kept in packets of *kau-pāt*) and *kūi* (chicken) and *mu* (*pork*) curry are offered to the dead and the offerings are floated away on water in receptacles (*dung*) made of banana sheaths. Thereafter the houses are sanctified by sprinkling water with *sinkarā* flowers (*Tai-blak-sheng-phū*). Then a feast is given with pork, chicken and rice beer to members of fourteen clans. At this stage the Ahom priests tell about the feelings, good or bad, of the dead towards the family by examining *lin-kāi* (the uvula) of the cooked fowls. •

PUTĀ BHOJ

(Burial Feast)

Putā bhoj or the burial feast is given in the open field erecting a pandal outside the compound. It is held just after, and not within, one year from the date of death. It is what is called also *jnāti bhoj*, that is, a feast to which only the related persons are invited. Where possible and times agree the Indian month of *Coitra* is preferred for holding this feast.

For this feast following food articles are necessary :—

- (1) Okhowā Cāul (rice husked out from boiled paddy) ;
- (2) Pulse (*māti māh* or pulse of the black variety)
- (3) Fish — (large varieties) ;
- (4) Meat — (pork and chicken or in the absence of the latter pigeon) ;
- (5) Rice-beer — (home-made *Sāj*) ;
- (6) 'Tel-Pānī — (a preparation as described above) ;
- (7) Mejengā — (a vegetable plant. In *Tai-phāk-kang-cāng*. It is essential against the danger of tape-worms in pigs)
- (8) Mecāki — (a vegetable plant of medicinal value.
In *Tai-phāk-Kang*)

The cooking is started in the morning by a few expert cooks supervised by a head cook so that the guests might be entertained round midday. Those who cook on such ceremonial occasions are chosen and respectable persons of the village, not professional hired cooks.

For cooking five earthen posts called *Udhān* are cut out from hard soil. They are to be of one to two feet in height capable of supporting large cooking brass vessels (called *tau* in Assamese) with the weight of the contents for cooking. The central *Udhān* must be the stoutest on both sides of which the other four are so made to stand as may support two such cooking vessels at the same time. The head cook salutes the middle *Udhān* with a pair of betel-nuts just before placing the vessels on the *udhāns* to start cooking. Indian *chaukā* is not dug for cooking on such an occasion. Since cooking takes time the cooks are entertained with light refreshments consisting of *Sāndah* (a preparation of rice fried and pounded), curd and *gur*.

When cooking is over all the guests sit round on the floor on square mats in the pandal with the covered vessels, containing the cooked foods, placed on banana leaves at the centre. A bowl containing *tel-pāni* preparation with a *marāṇ* twig in it is also taken round and

everybody touches the water and rubs on the palms, hands and legs and some quantity also sprinkled on the food vessels with the *marān-phul* twig for purifying them.

Then an offering of three dishes of the cooked foods in the name of three Gohains¹⁸ is made on a *tāmuli pirā* (a low flat wooden stool). Then *kau-pāts* (or banana leaves) are spread down in front of every guest with a rice-beer (*sāj*) cup of bell-metal on its side.

Likewise similar *kau-pāt* dishes with beer cups are also placed for the ancestors on the north-east corner (*marā-muā* i. e. the side of the dead) of the pandal.

Then the cooks distribute the foods and beer. The leading man then utters with a raised voice blessings on the members of the family and then all will proclaim in a chorus — ‘*jaya Rāma bulā, jaya Hari bulā*’. This is in Assamese style — while the guests are blessing, the members of the household need not bow down on their knees.

Next the headman of the family, who is generally the eldest son of the deceased, would sit with the dishes of the ancestors just in front of him and offer rice-beer to the spirits of the dead in small earthen pots. He would then call his ancestors by name to sit at the dishes and make signs of washing their hands and mouths by pouring water from a pot by turning it on the reverse side. He would then offer to them their dishes of the feast and the rice-beer cups and request them to accept. The assembled guests would also address the ancestors and say — ‘be pleased to accept the dishes with rice, curry and beer offered to you by so and so (utter the name of the person who offers, that is, the host), your son or so and so (mention the relationship with the deceased).

When this ceremony of offering is over the guests start eating. The chief guests, as a matter of custom, divide among themselves the dishes offered to the three Gohāins in addition to their own dishes and take them. When the eating is over all members of the household — sons, daughters and sons-in-law including the person playing the host who may be a relation of the deceased, are to bow down on their knees to the assembly of guests who would then bless them. While bowing the family members would place before them a full bunch of arecanuts (*Tai-mākmū*) and one *muthā* or bundle of betel-leaves (*Tai-myao-pu*) one *muthā* = ten *guchis* = $20 \times 10 = 200$ (betel-leaves)

18. They are, according to the leading men of the cāodang community, Cāo-thāo-lung, cāo-phrang-mòng and cāo-cheng-lung (Bar-Gohāin, Burā-Gohāin and Barpātra-Gohāin).

in a bamboo basket called *dāli* honouring the guests. After having blessed the members of the household the guests would go out and wash their hands and mouths and come back and take their respective seats again. In the meantime the floor is cleared of the dishes and remnants of foods left there by the guests.

Following this a betel-nut tray (*batā*) with cut pieces of betel-nuts in it is brought for the guests. The host then individually approaches the guests and offer a roll of cut pieces of betel-nuts politely begging to be excused for any unintentional lapse or short-coming in the reception. Thus the function being over the guests disperse and go home.

The host then collects the dishes offered to the ancestors in a basket (*pāsī*) and under the guidance of the priest (Deodhāi or, in his absence, any Elder of the Society) proceeds to the maidām and places them on it for the spirits under an already constructed Assam type two-roofed thatched shed with a floor under it cleared of grass for the purpose and in this he may be assisted by his relations. He also keeps there a low stool (*pirā*) or a mat (*dharā*) for the spirits to sit and a hand-fan for use by the side of the dishes under the shed and returns home.

MUL BHOJ

(Grand feast)

After the Putā bhoj a grand feast called *Mul-bhoj* consisting of rice, meat, fish, vegetables and rice-beer is offered for the dead after one year or two years of the occurrence of death. It is organized in the open field erecting a pandal outside the compound of the deceased. In this feast *tel-pānī* is excluded. To this feast persons outside the circle of relations are also invited and entertained with all the other formalities of the *Putā-bhoj*.

On the second day another feast with similar food articles is offered to propitiate a couple of evil spirits (male and female) called khubā-khubi who otherwise is supposed to do harm to the surviving members of the family. To this feast, organized on a smaller scale only the members of the village are invited leaving out the outsiders. At the khuba-khubi ceremony, which is performed before eating by one, who acts as a priest. Khubā-khubi *mantras* (mystic formulas) are recited after which the guests take fried pulse (*māti-māh*) and pounded fried rice (*karāiguri*. *Tai-Khāo-khru*) on their palms and eat them.

Next when the feast is ready they sit round and partake of the cooked foods after their distribution, Having finished eating they wash their hands and mouths and disperse after taking betel-nuts. On the third day the workers of the village chiefly youngmen and young women, who helped by their labour to organise the feast, are fed by the host with cooked rice, meat, fish, vegetables etc. to their heart's content. This completes the death ceremonies, particularly when the head man of the family dies.

COMMENTS

Since the reign of Cāo-Hpā Hsö-tām-lā-*alias* Svargadev Jayadhvaj Singha (A. D. 1648-1663), the first Tai-Ahom king to formally embrace Hinduism, there had been a marked decline in respect for the cultural heritage of the Tai-Ahoms, and after a temporary restoration under cāo-Hpā Hsö-pāt-Hpā *alias* Svargadev Gadādhār Singha (A. D. 1681-1696) the decline was accelerated since the reign of his son Rudra Singha (A. D. 1696-1714) who opened up the gates for the flood-tide of a new sectarian Hindu culture of eastern India. As long as the Tai-Ahoms followed their own religion the kings made offerings to the Gods at Carāideo through state ceremonies performed as occasions demanded for the good of the king and the country, but with the adoption of Hinduism as much attention and resources had to be devoted to Hindu ritualism and institutions as to the administration of the country. Such major diversion from temporal to spiritual matters on the part of the rulers had its baneful affect which manifested itself in due course. Another weakening effect of such adoption of a new religion without knowing its implications was that of untouchability inherent in Hinduism which socially and, in time, politically too alienated the friendly tribes and communities of the hills and plains with different cults and customs. Even the Tai-Ahom race itself was disintegrated into sections for instance, those following the orthodox Hindu way of life and those adhering to their own religion and customs, such as the cāodāngs and the members of the priestly families.

The vigorous Ahom life of the glorious period of Assam from cāo-hpā Hsö-kā-Hpā (A.D. 1228-1268) to cāo-Hpā-Hsö-Pung-Möng *alias* Svargadev Chakradhvaj Singha (A. D. 1663-1669) with efflorescence of Tai-Ahom culture and literature and enhancement of political prestige is now virtually obliterated by the forces of the new environment created. One has now to visit the areas of the old priestly families and Cāodāng villages to make an on-the-spot study of

the true Tai-Ahom customs and religious practices which are still current in the social life of these people who have enshrined them as precious heritage of the race. Though the change of language-Assamese for Tai-has affected many words and expressions used in various ceremonies, such as *jaya Rām bulā*, *jaya Hari bulā* for corresponding expressions with different meanings in this yet the essential features of those ancient ceremonies are preserved intact to this day. *Khubā-khubi* is another puzzle.

The Tai-Ahoms believe that by death the body perishes but the spirit (soul) lives with a finer body associated with certain human qualities. The incorporeal spirit lives in the world of spirits and eats and drinks, is pleased and offended, like ordinary human beings. Thus to the Tai-Ahoms death is not annihilation. The oblation of cooked food to the departed spirit is inspired by this belief. Ancestor worship with feasts is a cardinal feature of their family and clan life.

Feeding the clansmen, who are also the members of the village, by organizing community feasts as occasions demand, is regarded as a social duty and spiritual function by the Tai-Ahoms. In case of death of a man and in ancestor worship the feast is obligatory among them.

CHAPTER—X

AHOMS IN THE MĀYĀMĀRĀ SECT

The Māyāmariās (from Māyāmārā) are a vaiṣṇavite sect of Eastern or Upper Assam founded by Aniruddhadev (1553-1626), a disciple of Śrī Śrī Gopāldev, Satrādhikār of Kāljhār Satra in the district of Kāmrup. The Satra comes under Kāla Saṁhati.¹ For initiation Harakanthagiri (Later Aniruddha) of Viṣṇu Bālikunchi of the district of Lakhimpur went to Kāljhār by boat down the Brahmaputra. In the *Aniruddhadev Caritra* it is said he was going to Bhawānipur to meet Gopāldev of Kāljhār Satra. It may be noted that there are as many as four Gopāl Ātās, 'Ātā' meaning a spiritual guide or Satrādhikār (Abbot of a Vaiṣṇava monastery or Satra), All four Gopāl Ātās belong to Kāla Saṁhati and of Kāmrup. Of them one was of Bhawānipur Satra of which the time of foundation is shown as A. D. 1595-1620 and another of Kāljhār Satra of which the time of foundation is shown as A. D. 1600-1625². Thus there were two contemporary Gopāl Ātās as heads of two different Satra.

But as mentioned above *Aniruddhadev Caritra* (pp. 12-13) says that Harakanthagiri went to Bhawānipur to be initiated (*Śaraṇ*) by Gopāldev of Kāljhār Satra. Was it that Kāljhār Satra was in the geographical area of Bhawānipur? Harakantha was with Gopāldev (or Gopāl Ātā) for more than three years before returning to Viṣṇu Bālikunchi to establish his own Satra there.

Harakanthagiri was Kāyastha by caste of a Bhuyan family of Viṣṇu Bālikunchi (or Bālikunchi) of Dhalpur in the Western part of the district of Lakhimpur in Upper Assam. He was the son of Gondāgiri and his mother was Ājali Devī, the daughter of Śrī Śrī Śankardev's uncle. Aniruddhadev was thus a nephew of Śankardev. At the time of initiation Harakantha was advised by his religious preceptor (Guru) Gopāldev to strictly follow the path *Bhakti* (devotion) and instruct the initiated in this line alone barring the paths of other creeds that might divert the attention of the followers.³ To carry out this

1. There are four Saṁhatīs to which the Satras are affiliated. The Saṁhatīs are (1) Brahma Saṁhati, (2) Puruṣa Saṁhati, (3) Nikā Saṁhati and (4) Kāla Saṁhati. Saṁhati is a religious community or group following a particular cult. It is in brief, a sect of Vaiṣṇavas. 2. See Dr. S. N. Sarma's *The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, (G. U., 1966), pp. 220-221.

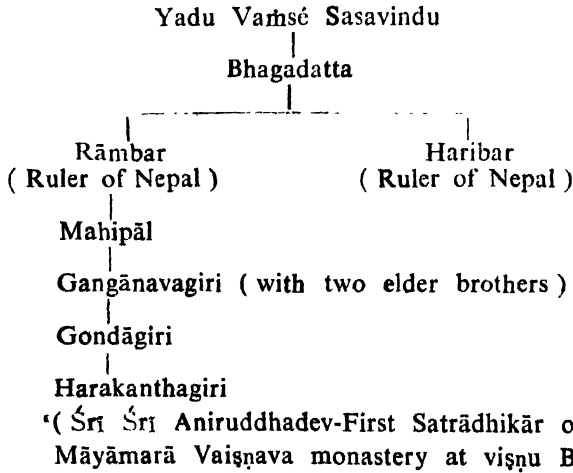
3. See *Śankarī Smṛiti Grantha—'Māyāmariā Vaiṣṇav Dharmar Itivṛita'* by Nakulchandra Chetiā (Tinsukia, Assam, 1972), p. 24

mission Harakantha was given the sacerdotal name of Aniruddha by Gopādev.

Aniruddhadev then came back to his own place viṣṇu Bālikunchi, established a Satra there and started his proselytizing mission. He and his successors could convert some eight lākhs of persons from among the Ahoms, Koches, Kāyasthas, Kalitās. Brahmins, Kaivartas and Marāṅs as their disciples in Upper Assam. The present district of Dibrugarh, particularly the Tinsukia sub-Division, is the home of the Māyāmariās or Mateks as they call themselves. The Ahoms constitute a large section of these disciples.

There are two literary sources of information about the origin and growth of the Māyāmariā sect and they are *Ādi Carit*, said to be written by Mādhavdev by internal evidence and *Śrī Śrī Aniruddhadev Caritra* and the *Vaiṣṇavali of the Māyāmariā Gosāins* written in verse by the sixteenth Māyāmariā Adhikār Cidānandadev (1825-1881) adapting from an earlier work of one Kriṣṇadās Dvija of the Māyāmariā sect. The present Māyāmariā Gosāins disown the *Ādi Carit* puthi as a forged document written by a third-rate poet and not by Mādhavdev. The puthi (book) presents not only a poor style of poetry but also a factually wrong picture of the rise of the sect. It is, they say, a spurious book written to do harm to the sect. According to them the second work, namely, *Śrī Śrī Aniruddhadev Caritra and the Vaiṣṇavali of the Māyāmariā Gosāins*⁴ is an authentic work on the religion of the Māyāmariās.

The *Vaiṣṇavali* puthi describes the genealogy and succession of the Māyāmariā Gosāins. From it I give below a genealogical table down to Aniruddhadev :-



4. Under this title the original manuscript puthi written by Cidānandadev was printed and published by the Māyāmarā Hitasādhinī Sabhā, Tinsukia, 1933.

MĀYĀMARIĀ OR MOAMARIĀ

Māyāmariās are more popularly known as Moāmariās and in public records and old buranjis we often come across the word 'Moāmariā instead of 'Māyāmariā'. At the back of this the puthi *Ādi Carit* is probably responsible. The story in the *Ādi Carit* goes that when Śankardev was at Barduā he was once sailing in a boat in the month of *Fālgun* (Feb-March) to Ratnapur Asam with his chief devotees such as Gopāl, Dāmodar and Aniruddha. Śankardev was cheerless as he had left behind his favourite tāntre puthi *Dhātu Tāmṛākṣari Kalpataru Śāstra*. It was a book of mystical formulae and spell written on copper leaves and was of great spiritual value in the family of Śankardev. It was used for worshipping various gods and goddesses by reading or reciting from it. It was supposed to possess the power of fulfilling all desires, for which it was called *Kalpataru*.

While the party was sailing up on the boat, says *Ādi Carit*, the sky became overcast with clouds and the weather became stormy with lightning flashes and thunder-showers. At this Aniruddha, just to save their lives, muttered certain mystic formulae from the scripture *Tāmṛākṣari* propitiating the presiding god of the clouds with the miraculous effect that the gathering clouds immediately disappeared from the sky and with them the storm and rains ceased.

Śankardev being a Vaiṣṇav believed in the worship of Viṣṇu alone or his incarnation (avatāra) to the exclusion of other minor gods. Hence he strongly condemned the act of propitiating the god of clouds for fear of the storm, because it went against the creed he was preaching. He therefore expelled, in the midstream, Aniruddha from the company of his devotees and asked him to get down from the boat.

Aniruddha proudly got down from the boat into the waters of the Lohit and by the power of the *Mantras* of the book *Tāmṛākṣari* rendered the deep waters as shallow as knee-deep and all in the boat were surprised to see Aniruddha standing in the midst of the mighty Lohit. Śankardev went away, but by second thought made an attempt by sending Mādhav and Jadumaṇi by boat to persuade Aniruddha to come back to their company, but the latter refused to come. At this Śankardev asked his disciples to completely boycott him and not even to talk with him and his followers. He also charged Aniruddha with having stolen away the *Kalpataru Śāstra*, from his custody. He tore asunder a blade of grass indicating his

complete severance of connection with Aniruddha from that day. *Ādi Carit* says that after separation from Śankara Aniruddha established his first Satra at Holongāguri on the bank of the river Tengā-pāni to the south of the Brahmaputra.⁵ But the story goes that the first Satra was established on the bank of a lake (*dubi*) or *bil* called Moāmarā and the *Moā* fish of that lake were offered in worship by the Moāmariās and also were taken with food by them for which these disciples of Aniruddhadev came to be known as Moāmariā and their *guru* was called Moāmariā Gosāin. Others say that 'Moāmariā' is a term of ridicule applied to the Māyāmariās by the members of a hostile camp meaning probably the followers of Śankardev who call themselves Mahāpuruṣiās. But if Moāmarā' is used merely in reference to a place name without the addition of any derogatory epithet then there need not be much objection.

But this entire story is challenged by the Māyāmariā authorities as Aniruddhadev was never a contemporary of Śankardev as a preacher. Sankardev was born in A. D. 1449 and Aniruddhadev was born after 104 years in A. D. 1553. It is something extraordinary. Even if Sankardev lived upto A. D. 1568 a long life of about 119 years-Aniruddha was a teen aged child not more than fifteen years of age at that date. He started preaching in A. D. 1606. Hence the *Ādi Carit* story about the tragic separation of Aniruddhadev from Śankara is a deliberate fabrication to undermine the prestige of the Māyāmariās.

Once Aniruddhadev came by boat with his beloved friend Ātā Yadumanidev to the south bank of the Brahmaputra and found a place suitable for a Satra just down Kakilāmukh. He planted a reed there indicating the site for establishing a Satra later on. From planting (*putā*) a stake (*khuti*) at that place the area acquired the name of khutiāputā.

Just at that time Hsō-Khām-Hpā or Khurā Rajā came on a tour to that place and met Aniruddhadev. Suspecting the latter to be a man who lived by fraudulent practice of religion in the guise of a Mahanta the Raja, in order to test his spiritual powers, placed an earthen jar before him with a turban in it and the mouth covered and asked him to say what was there inside the jar. Aniruddhadev said that there was a Cobra there. The Rājā thought that the Mahanta was trapped, but actually when the cover was removed a black cobra came out raising his terrible hood. All became frightened and nervous at the sight of the snake and the Raja requested Aniruddhadev to

5. Vide *Aniruddhadev Caritra*, P. 10

put the snake back into the jar. The Gosain by his will power made the snake vanish. The Rājā then recognized him as a great spiritual sadhu who could create the illusion of a snake and then make it disappear. Since the Gosain destroyed (*morā*) the illusion (*māyā*) he got the epithet of Māyāmarā since that day and his Satra was called 'Māyāmarā' Satra'⁶ and his disciples Māyāmarīās.

The spiritual sense, in which the term *māyāmarā* is said to be used, is that the cult emancipates the true devotees from *madhumatī māyā*.⁷

MATAK OR MATEK

According to *Aniruddhadev Caritra* (p. 50) it was the Ahom king Hsö-Hseng-Hpā (1603-1641) or Buddhi Svarganārāyaṇ who dubbed the Māyāmarīās 'Matek' as they were of one mind with undivided devotion to one Guru (religious guide). But as early as Hsö-Kā-Hpā's (1228-68) advent the Matak king Badauchā was ruling in upper Assam. Hsö-Kā-Hpā made friendship with Badauchā.⁸ According to *Chandrakānta Abhidhān* (p. 817) there is mention of Matak, Marāṇ and Narā in the Ahom (in Tai language and script), Khāmti and singpho Buranjis. The *Abhidhān* (Dictionary) says that Mataks were a powerful group of Tai people who had earlier migrated from Burma and settled in the upper part of Eastern Assam (upper Assam). In course of time the land in which they settled came to be known as 'Matak' country. The Ahoms called the Mataks Tai-Klang. Grammatically if *mat* and *ek* are combined the word cannot be Matek, it must be *matoik* or better *matoika*. Probably due to the preponderance of the Mataks among the disciples of the Māyāmarīā Gosains the whole community came to be known as Matak community and in it racially men and women of Tai or Ahom origin constitute the major part and it is actually so from the physical characteristics of the Matak or Māyāmarīā population. 'Matek' may be a priestly epithet applied to the community at a much later date, probably between A. D. 1878 and 1881. The term 'Matak' is seen to have been used by the community to refer to themselves. For there is a Matak Sanmilan to represent the Matak community, that is, the Māyāmarīās in the public field. Though the term Matak is rejected

6. Nakulchandra Chetia : *Śankart Smṛiti Grantha*, ibid, P. 18.

7. '*madhumatī*', full of honey, attractive, sweet 'māyā', illusion, that which is not real, meaning illusion of the worldly attachment. see *Aniruddhadev Caritra*. pp. 18-19. Gopaldev initiating Aniruddha said *mardīā māyāka thākā dharmaka ācari*, you follow dharma by destroying māyā

8. Kashinath's' Assam Buranji Sār (D. H. A. S. 1964 Gauhati). p. 10.

by the Māyāmariā Gosāins, it is accepted and used by the community. Even the Māyāmariā Ahoms say that they are not Ahoms, they are Mataks. Thus irrespective of what the *Carit puthis* say the denomination Matak has become established and is also historically valid.

Though the Māyāmariās would like to call themselves Matek or a community of one mind and one principle yet the Hindu caste rules prevail among them. They intermarry and interdine castewise, not between different castes, Marriage takes place between a Brahmin, and a Brahmin Kāyastha and Kāyastha, Ahom and Ahom, Koivarta and Koivarta and so on. No merger of castes in one Māyāmarā or Matek brotherhood was effected by the religion. What is true of intermarriage is also true of interdining, though the barrier of interdining has been relaxed to some extent except in relation to the Koivartas.

MĀYĀMARĀ SATRAS

Māyāmarā Vaiṣṇav Dharmar Itivritta by Nokul Chandra Chetia gives an account of the Māyāmarā Satras that were established by the Gosains of the sect in various parts of Assam with the spread of their proselytizing activities. Thus they are shown as follows :-

<i>Nane of Satrādhikār</i>	<i>Name of Satra</i>
Śrī Śrī Aniruddhadev	1. Viṣṇu Bālikunchi Satra.
Śrī Kriṣṇadev (son)	2. Nāharāti Satra (Marnoi)
Śrī Jagatānandadev (second son)	Khutiāputā Satra.
Śrī Bhabānandadev (third son)	Bhagā Cāpari Satra (in Mājuli)
Śrī Hridayānandadev (fourth son)	Gunākata thān Satra (in Mājuli)
Madhāi Sadāi Sanātan	Sārjān Satra (above garamur in Mājuli)
sons of Kriṣṇadev (Madhur murti)	Puranipām Satra (near Dhalijān)
Disciples (called 'Burāh') of Astabhuj, the ninth Adhikār of Māyāmarā Satra.	
Bhabānanda (Burah)	Tiphuk Satra. (This Satra has twelve branches)
Śrī Pitāambar Chandradev (10th Adhikār)	} Khutiāputā Satra.
Śrī Bhajanānandadev (11th Adhikār)	

Śrī Harimaydev

(descendant of fifth son

Sarvānandadev of Aniruddhadev)

Māyāmarā Garhparā Satra

(1728 śak)

Śrī Bhaktānandadev

(12th Adhikār of main Māyāmarā

Satra at Khutiapota)

1. Satra in Mājuli (due to Burmese
invasion)

2. Satra at Barbheti. (after invaders
left Barbheti, 1755 śak

3. Māyāmarā Dinjay Satra, 1759
śak, near Sābwā on the bank
of the stream Dinjān at the
request of Matibar Bar Senāpati,
son of Rajā Sarvānanda.

Śrī Cidānandadev

(16th Adhikār of Māyāmarā Satra)

Dinjay Satra.

Śrī Chandrakāntadev

(staying outside)

Śrī Jagatānandadev

Dinjay Satra.

Śrī Candrakāntadev

(after returning home)

Madārkhāt Satra. (on the bank of
the river Cencā)

Śrī Purnānanda Dāngariā

(a descendant of Mudoi ganyā)

a vicar of Śrī Aṣṭabhuj Gosāin)

Bagaritaliā Satra.

Vaiṣṇavānandadev

(eldest son of the 18th Adhikār

Hridayānandadev of Māyāmarā

Dinjay Satra)

Viṣṇu Bālikunchi Satra.

With the process of time innumerable branches of the original Māyāmarā Satra were established in Assam. Satrādihikārs of all these Satras regard Aniruddhadev to be their *ādiguru* (first pontiff). It is also asserted that just before the Māyāmarā Marāṇ revolt of Oct. 1769 the total strength of disciples of the Māyāmarā school of Assam Vaiṣṇavism was more than 800000 (eight lakhs).

BAR BHETI

It is related in the *Vaṃsāvalī* that Aṣṭabhuj (1670-1692 śak or A. D. 1748-1770) the eighth Māyāmarā Gosāin from Aniruddhadev, could vitalize with his spiritual powers that there would be no

descendants of his lineage. He therefore thought of leaving behind a permanent memorial after his death in the form of a huge foundation (*bar bheti*) at Mālow-pathār to the north-west of the town of Jorhāt and to raise it he invited all his disciples from Sidiyā to the Mānāhā. When the latter assembled it was found upon counting that they were eight lakhs in all. Each devotee *bhakta* brought one clod of earth to build the foundation and threw it on the site singing the name of Hari with the result that a foundation of an enormous size was formed. It was sixty cubits high. The numerical strength of the disciples encouraged their militant leaders to take up arms and organize a revolt against the Ahom King Lakṣmī Singha. After a number of engagements the royal army was defeated by the Māyāmarīās who attacked under the leadership of Rāghav Marāṇ and ousted Lakṣmī Singha from the throne in A. D. 1769. Ramākānta, the Marāṇ chief and son of Nāhar Khurā, was placed on the Ahom throne at Rangpur and Rāghav himself assumed the office Barbaruā, The Barbaruā was also the Commander-in-chief of the armed forces of Upper Assam. But after a short-lived rule of Ramākānta a power struggle ensued among the leading personalities of the Māyāmarīās such as Ramākānta, Rāghav and Bāyan Dekā, son of the Māyāmarīa Gosāin Aṣṭabhuj. But it may be noted that Aṣṭabhuj himself was not in favour of an armed revolt against the Ahoms. It was planned by Rāghav turning down the good advice of the Gosāin. Such was the impetus given by the *bar Bheti* to the discontented Māyāmarīās to challenge the Ahom authority in an armed conflict. But after a temporary ascendancy the Māyāmarīās, divided by internal dissension suffered disaster yielding back the throne to Lakṣmī Singha. The first victory of the Māyāmarīās was also partly due to their alliance with the exiled prince Mohanmālā Barjanā Gohāin, the third son of Rudra Singha, a popular figure among a large section of the Ahoms. Rāghav's political tactics of holding up before the Ahoms Mohanmālā as the next king deluded the exiled princes and many brave Ahoms to take the side of the Māyāmarīā rebels. But during Gaurināth Singhas reign (1780-1795) the Māyāmarīās devastated the country, made Bharath Sing (Bharat chandra in the puthi) King at Rangpur and the Hātisungi Marāṇs made Sarbānanda King (Svargadev) at Bengmorā (Tinsukia), over the territory to the east of the Dihing. On appeal by Gaurināth, who escaped to Gauhati, Captain Welsh was sent with a force by Lord Cornwallis, apparently to deal with the Bengal mercenary soldiers in Assam, but had to drive back the Māyāmarīās liberating Rangpur and restoring the throne to Gaurināth.

But the territory beyond the Dihing was *recognized by the British* authorities as the Matak country under the rule of Matibar Bar Senāpati, son of Svargadev sarbānanda Singha.

The Māyāmariās belong to Kāl Samhāti. They claim that they strictly follow the teachings of Śankardev, particularly the monistic doctrine of one god and no others. They also assert that in the second Skandha of the Assamese Bhāgavat, written by Śankardev, it is enjoined that 'the devotees must not bow down to other gods and goddesses, nor take foods (*prasād*) offered to them, and must not also look at the images or idols of such gods or goddesses and enter the house where they are worshipped, since that would corrupt the devotion' to one god meaning Kṛiṣṇa. 8 To violate this principle on the part of a Māyāmariā is a great sin. But the above injunction of Śankardev is not there in the Śanskrit Bhāgavat. It appears that Śankardev's second Skandha of the Bhāgavat is not a literal translation of the second Skandha of the original sanskrit Bhāgavat. Because the insertion of that injunction in the Assamese Bhāgavat is not in consonance with the spirit of the original Bhāgavat composed by Vyāsa. This might be inserted by Śankardev himself to prevent defection among his disciples or interpolated by a later writer during a period of sectarian jealousy.

Vaiṣṇavite devotional literature analyses devotion (*bhakti*) into nine kinds, namely, listening, singing, recollecting, adoration, invocation, worshipping, service, intimacy, and self-dedication. To these nine kinds of qualified bhakti was added the tenth kind of unqualified devotion or reverence to Hari which alone liberates the devotee from the suffering of the worldly life in the Kali Yuga. This is the essence of the Māyāmariā cult.

Initiation :

Initiation is administration of what is called in priestly terminology *Śaraṇ*. Those who come for Śaraṇ have to remain fasting the previous night singing the glory of Hari. Early next morning they have to clear their bowels, shave the hair of the head and the face except the eye-brows, and wear white *dhotis* without coloured border. They will be then given a packet of betel leaves each which they have to hold with folded palms in front of their fore heads. In that posture

8. *ek deo ek seo, ek bine nāi keo, anya devi deo nakaribā seo, prasādu nekhaibā tār. murtiko necāibā, griho napaśibā, bhakti hoiba byabhūcār.* 545, skandha II. This one god is Kṛiṣṇa, for it is also said in the *Kīrtan Ghoṣā* that Kṛiṣṇa is the only god who can remove the sufferings (*Kṛiṣṇa, eka deva dukkhahāri Kāla māyā dūru adhikārī.* etc.).

they have to line up and proceed to the nearest river, lake or tank and thrice dive upto the neck uttering the name of the 'Mahāpuruṣ'. They will then return in the same order as before to their *Guru* (Preceptor) sitting in the *Yugāsan* in the *Nam-Ghar* (Prayer house) and kneel down before him. Then the *Guru* would utter three times the *Śaran mantra* of Mahāpuruṣ Śrī Śrī Aniruddhadev and make them prostrate with all the eight parts (two hands, breast, forehead, two eyes, throat, middle of the back) of the body three times, that is once after every utterance. Then the officer called *Khātaniār* would take from each his packet of betel leaves and place at the feet of the *Guru* mentioning the name of the person. The *Guru* would give in return another sacred name to each person so initiated and the *Khātaniār* would explain the significance of the new name. After this function is over all the initiated would be made to sit before the *Guru* and the latter would instruct them on moral life. Thereafter all would be given *pakā mithoi* (balls of dried rice powder fried in molasses) or in its absence any other light refreshment prepared from rice powder to break their fast and allowed to disperse.

If among the initiated devotees of the *Māyāmarīā Society* one devotee strikes another with a weapon then he commits an offence against the sacred name of God (*Viṣṇu*) and becomes disqualified for holding any office in the *Society* though he may be allowed to dine with other devotees. It is also a partial offence if one devotee utters angry words against another devotee by pointing a finger at the latter. Such offenders are purified by the ceremony of expiration before admission into the *Māyāmarīā Society* as above. All members of the *Māyāmarīā Society* are equal. On ceremonial occasions when they sit for eating they start eating simultaneously uttering the sacred word *rām* and before eating enquiry is made whether everybody in the assembly has got his share of *prasād* or feast. Again eating of all must end at the same time ; for, when some are still eating no body must finish his eating, because then unfinished dishes of the former become *ucchiṣṭa* (remains of a meal or *prasād*). This practice demonstrates that *Nārāyaṇa* is there in all living beings in the form of the soul. To the *Māyāmarīās* the state of supreme devotion to God (*Viṣṇu*) is preferable to individual liberation and merger with God. Hence they seek *bhakti* and not *mukti* or *bhakti* first without aspiration for *mukti*.

Four principal *Māyāmarīā Satras* to day are *Dinjay*, *Madār Khāt*, *Garhparā* and *Puraṇi Bheti*. The *Tāntric* book *Dhātu Tāmrākṣari* is not be found in any *Māyāmarīā Satra*. Probably it was lost with *Aṣṭa-bhuj Adhikār*.

The Scriptures of the Māyāmarā Vaiṣṇavism are the following and they were composed by Aniruddhadev at the Nāharāṭī Satra :-

1. The Fifth Skandha of the Bhāgavat (in Verse).
2. The Fourth Skandha of the Bhāgavat-25th to 31st cantos (in verse).
3. A book of Bargīt, 182 in all, with six *totay bhattimā*.
4. A book called *Bhakti mangal* in verse with 805 *Ghoṣās*. It is a book of everyday use of the devotees.
5. Nij Śāstra containing the essence of the Vaiṣṇav Śāstras. It is made a confidential book to be used only by devotees who are advanced on spiritual line.

It may be noted for avoiding confusion that there is another book called *Bhakti-mongal* composed by the fourth Guru Nityānanda with 962 *Ghoṣās*. He also rendered into Assamese some parts of the fourth Skandha of the Bhāgavat.

Assam was a land of tribal cults practised mainly by the various off-shoots of the great Boḍo stock. Anthropologists say that the Boḍos, the Kachāris, the Chutiās, the Barāhis, the Rābh ās, the Lālungs and probably the Mikirs are the different appellations of the same original Boḍo stock who migrated to the plains of the Brahmaputra from the northern hills at different times and occupied different regions in the valleys. Their forms of worship were of a primitive character based on the original fertility cult. These peoples had a hard but vigorous life. The Boḍos, the Kachāris and the Chutiās were ruling races. Into their kingdoms came Brahmin priests and poets from time to time from India beginning possibly in the early centuries of the Christian era.

Then there came the cultural influence of Buddhism of the Mahā-Yāna school during the period of the eastern Pālas who extended their sway over the western part of modern Assam (Kāmarupa). The Vajra-Yāna form of Mahā-Yāna Buddhism had its centre at Kāmākhyā (properly Kāmākṣa). The Senas who came after the Pālas brought in Śaktism of Bengal Hinduism and Kāmākhyā became its centre by the suppression of Buddhism there. Then came a wave of Vaiṣṇavism of the neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement in the 15th century. Little is known about any early Vaiṣṇavism, if at all, in Assam except the discovery of a few icons of Viṣṇu in western Assam. These icons might have been brought thither by some early Vaiṣṇava saints or priests from outside Assam, for no propagation of Vaiṣṇavism in Assam is known

at that early time. Assam or Kūmarupa was always an independent country prior to its annexation to British India.

A social consequence of adoption of Hinduism by the Tai-Ahoms as their own religion after more than four hundred years of glorious rule in Assam was to divide themselves into as many rival religious factions as there were rival religious sects that arose in Assam out of the schism in the Hindu Priesthood. The sects into which Assam Hinduism split itself were first the Śāktas and Vaiṣṇavas. The preachers of Vaiṣṇavism claimed a higher, a more refined and a simpler approach to God than Śāktism characterised by animal and even human sacrifices in a crude and primitive fashion with costly and elaborate ceremonies. God does not want blood and violence, God wants our devotion with purity of heart. This is undoubtedly a high spiritual ideal, but in practice the Vaiṣṇava Gurus failed to maintain the integrity of Vaiṣṇavism. In their mutual jealousy they followed independent lines of proselytising activity and created not only what were called Saṁhatis or separate religious groups but also rival sects, such as Mahāpuruṣiā, Dāmodariā, Haridevī and Māyāmariā, each claiming some kind of superiority to others. This way of disintegration of an original concept is the characteristic of decadence of a system. In religion such disintegration is due to deviation from aims spiritual to aims temporal and material.

The Tai-Ahoms, so long they followed their own religion, good or bad, which they brought with them (earlier religion might be different) to this land, were not socially divided on religious grounds and therefore were united politically. But their conversion to Hinduism meant their absorption by different sects controlled by their respective religious masters. Thus the Ahoms lost their age-long racial identity except the name and became, as a race, disintegrated and weak. Hindu religious literature teaching a variety of cults, Purānic legends and bhakti sapped the vigour of life and killed the historic sense and glory of the past of the race. It is true of other Hinduism races and tribes of the Valley as of the Ahoms. It may be due to the failure of the Gurus to preach and interpret religion to their new followers in its true import or due to the failure of the converted to understand its correct meaning by breaking through the walls of its diverse institutional forms and taboos of the sectarian lines of religious life. In practical life differences between the sects as also of their Gurus are more prominent than their fundamental unity. Unfortunately the sectarian Hinduism in Assam is having a devitalizing rather than an edifying effect on the

people. The universal should be brought out of the confusing welter of creeds and forms of religion and given to the initiated and that by those who are really competent, but, as it is, religion is used as an instrument of caste domination over the society of simple folk. Religion, as practised as a vested interest, should therefore be radically reformed to remove the formal barriers and open up the way to all sections of the population to freely examine it to find out what is best in it and helpful in promoting life, individual and social, to higher planes of human achievement.

