

State Formation in Early Mediaeval Assam : A Case Study of the Chutiya State

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There appeared a sort of political vacuum in the early history of mediaeval Assam after the eclipse of the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa in the middle of the 12th century. This continued till the advent of the Ahoms and their consolidations. The Ahom and Assamese chronicles mention the existence of a powerful Chutiya state in Upper Assam. The origin of the Chutiya state is obscure. The state was in an evolutionary process when the Ahoms came. By the end of the reign of the Ahom king Suhummung *alias* Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) the emerging Ahom state engulfed the Chutiyas through a process of subjugation and assimilation.

Sources on Chutiya history are extremely limited to present a comprehensive account. The available ones are mostly legends. Thus the Ahom chronicles or the *Buranjis* and the epigraphical sources¹ coming to light in recent times, are the only sources for our purpose. But here also, the recorded translations of the Ahom language *Buranjis* need further scrutinization.

Indo-Aryan roots

A salient feature in the emergence of the various states in early mediaeval times in Northeast India happens to be the Aryan-Brahmanic influence. It all started roughly with the beginning of the Christian era.² The formation of the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa was largely due to this influence and apparently through a process of *Kshatriyaisation* in the tribal dominated areas. The Brahmanic influence, in fact, was a civilising process much influencing the transitions and transformations from clan to family life, from communal to private property systems. The inter-contact between the two cultures became a determining factor in the formation of the early states in the early part of mediaeval Assam.

The Origin

The legends relating to the origin of the Chutiyas are full of absurdities without any historical moorings. However, there is no doubt that the Chutiyas had a distinct political entity. The *Buranjis* and the epigraphical sources testify to this fact. But even then the Chutiya history remains fragmented and its antiquity cannot be established. If the *Assamese manuscript work*³ said to have been in the possession of the king of Burma, which apparently is also subscribed by Edward T. Dalton, is to be believed, then the

Chutiya history might be pushed back to several centuries. Otherwise, any account on Chutiya history prior to the 13th century, would remain as mere historical conjectures.

N. Elias records that the Chutiya state became feudatory under the Mao-Shans when Samlongpha, the valiant Mao-Shan general, conquered it. He also records the existence of the petty Moran-Borahi states, and the Chutiyas exercising sovereignty over them ⁴

The Territory and the People

The Chutiyas ruled over a relatively extensive territory ⁵ onward the 13th century. They issued land grants, exercised authority of an overlord over the neighbouring sub-states. They had to fight tooth and nail against the rising Ahom might for survival. But doubt still persists as to whether the Chutiya rulers were Chutiyas at all or they were the aboriginal Chutiyas later *kshatriya*ised or Hinduised or Brahmins who imposed their rule on the prime Chutiya society. ⁶ Because scholars are unanimous that the Chutiyas belong to the great Bodo-Kachari race and that they have different cognate groups within them. They represent Mongoloid traits and the possibility of the infusion of Shan blood, as Gait has seen, cannot also be ruled out. ⁷

This leads us to the greatest problem in the dichotomic relation in the structure of the Chutiya population to have any theoretical formulation. In all probability, the Chutiya rulers might have been Hindus while their subjects were mostly non-Hindus. Moreover, there were the Chutiya ramifications in the Borahi-Chutiyas, Moran-Chutiyas plus the Deori-Chutiyas who alone now can be traced to Chutiya origin in respect of their social customs, rituals, language and other cultures. Thus the appearance of a 'class society' cannot be explained here but on the basis of the caste.

The dates of the Chutiya rulers vary widely according to different sources. For instance, the list of Chutiya rulers as given in the *Deodhai Asom Buranji* ⁸ greatly varies with the epigraphical evidence. If the dates of the same list are considered in terms of the Christian era, the dates almost approximate. But not only the dates, even the names also differ. At first, it needs to be ascertained about the Chutiya king who treacherously assassinated the Ahom king Sutupha (1369-1376) while they were together in a pleasure trip on boat in the Surry river. As per the Dhenukhana, Ghilamara and the Bormurtia Copper Plate grants of the Chutiya rulers, in all probability this Chutiya king could not be any other than Satyanarayana. In that case, the *Deodhai Asom Buranji* sources in this regard are opened to doubts.

Religion

The religious question of the Chutiyas also poses some problems. The worship of the *Kechaikhati Gosani*, offering human beings, raises several questions. Firstly, it was not performed by the Brahmins but by the Deori-Chutiya priestly class. Secondly, it appears more probable that this obviously is related to the tribal

fertility cult. Thirdly, it was the belief of the non-Hindu Chutiyas in that supernatural power known as the *Kechaikhati Gosani* whose benign blessings could be obtained only through human sacrifice to that all powerful goddess. Therefore, it is difficult to believe its relations with the *Hindu Tantrik* sects as Gait would have surmised.¹⁰

The Chutiya State

The extant sources indicate 'fairly advance class society' of of the Chutiyas, the social stratifications being marked by caste. However, the caste system was in its marginal form and not rigid.¹¹ Private property was emerging but the labour utilisation processes were yet to generate enough surplus leading to a hierarchical bureaucracy. Whatever surplus it could generate, these were utilised for constructional activities as evidenced by the ruins in and around the capital city of Sadiya.

At the apex of the state structure was the king and the crown princes. The king exercised absolute power assisted by the crown princes. The mention of the name of the crown prince in issuing the land grants indicated that they wielded great powers next only to the king. The king and the crown princes personally conducted wars. A patrimonial hierarchy based on hereditary lines marked the character of the Chutiya monarchy.

The Chutiyas were excellent professionals in the arts and the crafts.¹² Later, some of them came to be known as Ahom-Chutiyas. They were admitted into the high offices in the Ahom government. Their complete absorption in the Ahom state system produced a stimulating factor in the formation of the Ahom state. It may be noted that the Chutiyas proved to be a formidable barrier¹³ in the initial state of the Ahom state building process.

The Chutiyas had, in appearance, state like formations. There was no economic basis for the unification and consolidation of the separate complex territories. Therefore, their rudimentary formations did not develop into a system of state *per se*. They had Hindu influence and a system of power organisation. They greatly contributed to the emerging political system of the time. With the pace of assimilations and acculturations under the hegemony of the Ahoms, they, in fact provided the much needed base for the birth of a greater broad-based Assamese state after the Ahoms in course of time.

Conclusion

I admit that this is a remote attempt to study the 'enclaved' polity of the Chutiyas in its segmentary small scale formations. But at the same time, it also becomes necessary to look at such formations as pressures and requirements of the time in the formation of larger state systems in a time continuum. Therefore, the analysis and observations in this case study are within this concept.

Notes & References

1. These are : (i) Bormurtia Bill Tamrapatra, 1392, (ii) Dhenukhana Copper Plate, 1392, (iii) Ghilamara Copper Plate 1401, (iv) Paya Tamreswari Temple Plate, 1442.
2. Chatterjee, S. K., *The Place of Assam in the History and civilisation of India*, Gauhati University, 1970, p.13.
3. Gogoi, P., *The Tai and The Tai Kingdoms*, Gauhati University, 1968, p. 160 (FN-240).
4. Elias, N., *Introductory Sketch of the History of the Shans in Upper Burma and Yunan*, Calcutta, 1976, p. 61.
5. Gogoi, P., n. 3, p. 266. Based on the *Borgohain Vamsavali*, Gogoi has recorded that the boundary of the Chutiyas state up to the mountains in the north, Buridihing river in the south, Brahmakunda in the east and up to the Sisi river in the east. The Bormurtia Beel Tamrapatra records the eastern boundary of the Chutiyas state upto the Suwansiri river. The *Borgohain Vamsavali* is said to have been an authentic transcript of an old Assamese manuscript. However, its authorship and date cannot be established and as such a weak source. Any way, that the Chutiyas ruled over an extensive area, can have no doubts.
6. Neog, Maheswar., "Light on a Ruling Dynasty of Arunachal Pradesh in the fourteenth and fifteenth Centuries", A Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Epigraphical Society of India, Guwahati, December, 1987.
7. Gait, E., *A History of Assam*, Lawyers' Book Stall, Guwahati, 2nd edn. Reprint, 1962. p. 40.
8. *Deodhai Asom Buranji*, ed. S. K. Bhuyan, DHAS, Guwahati, 1962. p. 197.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
10. Gait. n. 7, p. 42.
11. *DAB*, n. 8, p. 198.
12. The *mitha hulung tup*, a cannon of fine workmanship is credited to the Chutiyas.
13. *DAB*, n. 8, p. 37, 46, 47 ; Gait, E., n. 7, p. 98, 101.