



The Ahoms' Political Policy Towards the Neighbouring Hill Tribes: With Special Reference to the Nagas.

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Abstract

With the advent of the Ahom Kingdom in the first half of thirteenth century, the political scenario of the entire Brahmaputra valley underwent a significant transformation. The small, petty kingdom ruled by mostly traditional chief came under the suzerainty of the Ahom dynasty. Various tribal groups living in the surrounding hills to the north, east and south acknowledged the authority of the rising Ahom sovereignty. Numerous ethnic tribes such as the Akas, Daflas, Miris, Abors, Mishmis, Mikirs, Garos, Jayantiyas, Khasis, Nagas, Singphos etc., enriched the entire region with their unique cultures, languages, customs, and rituals since time immemorial. Among the tribes, the Nagas became significant due to their strategic location and indomitable courage. Amidst of this atmosphere, the Ahoms, through their vibrant efforts, founded the Ahom kingdom by adopting different effective approach in in various situations and periods, which lasted for around six hundred years. This paper aims to study the process, policies and tactics used towards the neighbouring hill tribes in establishing their powerful Ahom kingdom, with special reference to the Naga tribes.

Keywords: The Ahoms, the Nagas, Tribes, Hills, Kingdom, Administration

Introduction

The first Ahom king, Sukapha, laid the foundation of the Ahom kingdom in the upper region of the Brahmaputra Valley in the early part of the thirteenth century. The kingdom later expanded westward up to the mouth of the Manash River. The Ahom continue to their rule until 1826 before the formal annexation of the kingdom by the British through the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. The Ahom kingdom was bounded on the north, east, and south by hills inhabited by various tribes and other communities. During the Ahom rule, most of these tribes lived in isolation in the hills and were unacquainted with the advanced ideas of development from the neighbouring plains. The Ahom kings faced great difficulty in dealing with these tribes who were beyond the civilizing influence of the plains communities. However, the Ahom kings succeeded in bringing these bordering hill tribes

under their control by following a policy of peace and conciliation, thereby maintaining peace, tranquility, and law and order within the kingdom's jurisdiction.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is descriptive-cum-analytical. This study is primarily based on secondary sources of information. Relevant materials and data have been collected from a variety of sources including books, articles, journals, other published works, and web-based sources.

Ahom Policy towards the Hill Tribes

Each of the bordering tribes had its own distinctive manners, customs, rites, dialects and languages which kept them separated from one another. As a result, the bordering tribes never welcomed any alien ideas, instead they were hesitant to abandon their archaic tribal system and animistic religious practices. Thus, the propagation of New-Vaishnavism remained confined to the frontier areas of Duar regions only. Therefore, the Ahom kings were of the view that annexing such heterogeneous hill tribes would only add extra problems to the Ahom government, as these hill tribes had their own traditional administrative and social set up. This made it difficult for them to adjust to the unfamiliar Ahom administration, which was primarily based on the Paik system.

The neighbouring hill tribes who inhabited surrounding hill tracts were not able to produce sufficient agricultural articles to meet their daily needs. As a result they often plundered the frontier areas of Ahom territory and sometimes they forced people living in the border areas to supply food. However, the Ahoms did not resort to any retaliatory actions against them, as such actions could lead to unpredictable hazardous, and unexpected consequences.

Of course, the Ahom kings were capable of bringing the neighbouring hill tribes completely under their suzerainty. Nevertheless, such act would not have been fruitful or successful for the Ahom rulers. With regard to such a futile expedition, it may be mentioned that King Udayaditya Singha suffered heavy losses of men and provisions during his expedition against the *Daflas* in the Suvansiri region. King Rajeswar Singha had a similar experience when he sent an expedition to Manipur to restore the throne of his loyal ally Jay Singha from Burmese occupation, where they suffered the loss of two-thirds of their men and provisions.

Following a conciliatory policy and in order to prevent the inroads of hill tribes into the bordering territories, the Ahom government offered them fertile lands at the foot of their hills called *khats* and also made payment of a stipulated amount called *posa*, consisting of variety items such as cloth, rice, cattle, etc. which were collected from a class of *paiks* called *bahatias*, specially assigned to them for this purpose. Additionally, the hill tribes were granted the privilege of conducting commercial transactions with the plains. In return, the hill tribes acknowledged the authority of the Ahom king and paid an annual tribute comprising goods produced in their respective hills. From the annual tribute paid in kind by the hill tribes, the Ahom rulers were deriving the supply of many of their necessities,

The Ahom rulers gradually expanded their territory in the Brahmaputra valley from the eastern side to westward by bringing the petty indigenous powers under their control one after another. In the course of their westward expansion, the Ahoms came into conflict with the powerful forces of the Muslims. However, the Ahoms fought several battles against the Muhammadan forces in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Soon, the Ahom rulers realized that to resist such powerful forces, not only was military strength essential but also unity and solidarity across the regions were also required. Therefore, during times external threat, the Ahom rulers avoided unnecessary conflict with various tribal and community powers. As a result, the Ahom government received full support and was also able to recruit soldiers from various tribes whenever needed.

To govern the bordering hill regions and maintain relations with the neighbouring hill tribes, the Ahom government created a new post and appointed officers in their respective assigned territories. Thus, the Sadiyakhwa Gohain was appointed in the Sadiya region to look after the law and order situation, and to maintain the cordial relations with tribes living there, namely the Abors, Mishmis, Miri, and later the Khamtis and the Singphos. Similarly the Marangikhowa Gohain and the Rahial Baruah were appointed to administer the areas inhabited by the Kachari and the Mikirs. The Jagiyal Gohain and the Kajalimukhiya Gohain were in charge of the Jayantiyas, and the Barphukan and the Darrang Raja, of the Bhutanese. To support them in their duties, various *Duariyas* or guards of the passes, were appointed in different frontier regions.

The Ahoms created a favourable atmosphere for the intermingling of tribes through their liberal norms and practices. They maintained matrimonial alliances and inter-dined freely with the adjoining hill tribes. Evidences of intermarriage with the neighbouring hill tribes is found from the reign of Suhungmung, who married with a Manipuri Prince. Pratap Singha entered into a matrimonial alliance with the Jayantiya king, and Gadadhar Singha married two Naga princesses. Kancheng, the first Barpatra Gohain born and brought up in a Naga family. One of the well-known Ahom families, the Miri Sandikai, was originated from a Miri person who was the adopted son of a Buragohain. The Ahom rulers appointed tribal people to important administrative posts, if any one was found to be efficient. Thus the son of a Naga from the Banfera clan was appointed as the second Barphukan.

Thus, the Ahoms policy towards the neighbouring hill tribes was not based on a rigid overlord-vassal relationship, as the aim of the Ahom policy was not territorial expansion but to maintain friendly and cordial relations with the various tribes on the basis of mutual benefit and understanding.

Political Affair with the Nagas

Amongst the tribes, the Nagas lived in the vast mountainous tract on the northern side of Assam. They were divided into several tribes and sub-tribes and each practicing their own traditional customs and rites and speaking different languages and dialects. The Ahom government primarily had to deal with the Ao, Nocte, Lotha and Kanayak Naga living in the low hills of present-day Sibsagar and Dibrugarh districts, stretching from the Dayang to the Buri Dihing rivers. They also interacted with the Wancho Nagas, who inhabited the region of the present Tirap district in Arunachal Pradesh. The *Buranjis* mention them as Khamjangiyas, Aitoniya, Tablungiyas, Namchangiyas, Banfariyas, etc., names that were attributed to them by the Assamese people.

There were frequent conflicts between the Ahom rulers and the Nagas, as the territories occupied by the Nagas were of strategic importance to the Ahom kingdom. The first Ahom king, Sukapha, entered Assam through a route passing through this region. The Ahoms continued to maintain relations with their kith and kin in Burma, the Naras of Mogaung, through this traditional passage.

The land of the Nagas held great importance for the Ahom rulers from an economic point of view. There were several salt springs in the Naga areas and the Ahoms relied on them for their salt supply until salt began to be imported from Bengal. The Nagas remained peaceful for more than two centuries under Ahom rule, until a conflict arose between the Ahoms and the Tangsu Nagas in 1487, in which the Nagas were defeated. In 1504, the Aitoniya Nagas revolted, however, they later sought peace by offering a princess from the chief's family to the Ahom king Suhungmung. However, during his reign, other Nagas such as the Khamjangiya, Tablungiya, and Namchangiya revolted against him, eventually all of them were subdued in the course of time. In 1665, the Banferiya Nagas appealed to the Ahoms for help against the Banchungiya Nagas. In 1692, the Namchungiya and Banchungiya Nagas killed 23 Assamese people in the border regions. Then King Gadadhar Singha subdued them by taking severe measures against them. Latha Khunhao, the chief of the Nagas, was executed, after which, other Naga leaders reaffirmed the supremacy of the Ahom kings by appearing personally at the capital. There were several insurrections by the Nagas living in the Dayang area, but they also appealed for peace by offering two princesses of the Naga chief to the Ahom king Gadadhar Singha. However, occasional clashes continued till the end of the Ahom rule because of the strategic locations of the Naga-inhabited regions and also the economic interest of the Ahoms there. Nevertheless, the Ahoms occasionally invited the Naga chiefs to the royal court to maintain friendly relations based on mutual respect.

The Ahom government followed a specific conciliatory policy towards the Nagas in order to pacify them. They were granted revenue free fertile lands and fishing waters (Lakes or beels) along with the specific *paiks* to the Konyak, Aos, Noctes, and Lotha Naga tribes who inhabited on the southern border of the Sibsagar and Dibrugarh districts in Assam. These lands were collectively called as *Naga-Khats*, and Assamese agents called Naga-Katakis were assigned to manage them. However, the Naga tribes accepted the overlordship of the Ahom kings and paid yearly tribute in recognition of their status as subordinate chiefs under Ahom rule. Thus, the conciliatory policy followed by the Ahoms rulers towards the Naga tribes immensely helped them maintain relations with their kinsmen in Burma and also enable them to protect the kingdom from the possible domination of ambitious chief from that region.

Conclusion

The success of the Ahom tribal policy can be understood from their continued rule for six hundred years. During this period, they ruled the entire kingdom with absolute sovereignty and wrote a glorious chapter in golden letters, not only in the history of this region but also in the history of the country. With the gradual growth of the Ahom power, the tribal groups of the surrounding hills unhesitatingly recognized it as the sovereign Ahom power in the region. As most of the tribal group always interested in the fertile lands of plains, their greedy eyes remained fixed on these areas, which often led to violation of agreements and inroads into the border regions.

But Ahom rulers pardoned them whenever the rebellious groups submitted their illegal activities and reaffirmed their submission and loyalty before the Ahom kings. In particular, with regard to the Naga tribes, the Ahoms invited them to the royals feasts as to avoid frequent clashes with them.

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