

## Chapter 2

### The Āhoms and the Āhom Dynasty : Their Religion, Culture and their Absorption into the Hindu Cultural Systems

#### 2.1 The Tāi- Āhoms or Āhoms :

##### 2.1 ( a ) Their Ethnicity, Origin and their advent to Assam-

“The Ahoms or Tai Ahoms were a branch of the great Tai race and belonged particularly to the Shan section thereof, which occupied the northern and eastern hill tracts of Upper Burma and Western Yunnan in China (Basu, 1970, 17)”. Āhoms or the Tāi Āhoms migrated to Assam from the Indo- Chinese regions in the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century CE. They, entered Assam by crossing the passes of the Pāṭkāi Mountains located in the easternmost frontier of the Indian subcontinent. The Āhoms were headed by a prince believed to be of divine ascent and was known as Cāo-Lung Siu- Kā- Phā. He was addressed as Cāo Phā or *Svargadeo* ( lord of the heaven) by his subjects/ followers. According to the *Burañjī*-s or the traditional Āhom historical chronicles, Siu- Kā- Phā belonged to the lineage of *Khunlung* and *Khunlāi*, the divine preceptors of the Ahom race and grandsons of the god *Lengdon*- the ruler of the heavenly realm. The Āhoms, under the able leadership of Siu- Kā- Phā defeated and subdued the indigenous tribal clans, kingdoms and principalities like that of Nāgā-s, Cutiyā-s, Barāhī-s and Kacāri-s in eastern Assam. He ( Siu- Kā- Phā) along with his followers, moved from place to place in search of a suitable habitat to settle down upon. Dangkaorang, Khamhangpuna, Namrup, the Sessa river, Dihing, Tipam, Abhaypur and Habung are some of the significant places that lay on his route . It is said that at Habung in modern day Lakhimpur district in eastern Assam, the Āhoms under Siu Kā Phā settled for a brief period and started cultivation there (18). Habung has been venerated as a sacred site amongst the Āhoms. Many miraculous incidents, mysterious happenings and legends at Habung are spoken about in the Āhom folklore. For e.g.- the legend and mystery of *Deo Lagā Pukhurī* or Deo Lagā pond. Siu Kā Phā, finally established his capital city at Carāideo which is now in Sivasagar district of eastern Assam. It was Carāideo from where he laid a firm basis for the proliferation of the Āhom might and power. Siu- Kā- Phā pacified all the warring kingdoms and clans that were ruling different parts of the eastern region of Assam and brought them under the banner of

the Āhom kingdom. His descendants also followed him and they gradually brought the Āhom rule to the height of its glory. They brought a large part of north-eastern India under their control and were also aspiring and had planned to conquer Bengal during the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, but due to some internal disagreement and due to the sudden passing away of the then ruling king Rudra Simha or Siu-Khrung-Pha, that could not be done. After Carāideo, the Āhom capital and seat of power was transferred to Garhgaon and Rangpur, also in Sivasagar district, and lastly at Jorhat, also in eastern Assam. Jorhat remained the seat of the Ahom kingdom till the British took over in the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE. The modern day Sivasagar town, the administrative headquarters of the Sivasagar district grew around the tank known as Sivasagar or Bar Pukhurī which was dug under the patronage of king Śiva Simha, the Āhom king who ruled during the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, and under whose reign, artistic temper of the Āhoms as well as Assam witnessed a new revival.

### **2.1 (b) The Original or Ancestral Religion/ Religious faith of the Āhoms-**

The Āhoms had their own tenets and faith and these continued even after they accepted or got absorbed into the different traditions and systems of Hinduism from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards. It has been said by different historians that the ritual practices of the ancestral Āhom religion known as *Phurālung* or *Bānphī* has resemblances with the Śākta and Śaiva Tāntric rituals and conceptions which made the Āhoms to easily accept and absorb themselves to Hinduism in the later periods. As per evidences and historical narratives, there is no tradition of worship of material (sculpted or painted) anthropomorphic, theriomorphic and zoomorphic images or icons of deities in the original religion of the Āhoms. But, the Āhom royalty, till the end of their reign, were in possession of two images known as *Chum* and *Sheng* (Gogoi, P., 1976, 7). These two images were carefully preserved by the Āhom rulers for generations till the climax of their rule, and, they were venerated as their tutelary deities. Chum and Sheng are known as *Chumdeo/ Somdeo* and *Shengdeo* in Assamese. They came to be known as such after the Āhoms came to Assam, and got absorbed into the culture of the region. It is said that the image of Chumdeo, which was the most sacred and revered, was kept in secret inside a box or casket placed on a gold seat by the custodian Āhom king and never to be shown to anyone. The Āhom king was required to offer special worship to this image with milk, sacred water and varieties of aromatic concoctions, and after the completion of all the rituals, should

again be put inside the box/ casket (9). The image of Chumdeo/ Somdeo or *Chumphrārunṅmung* is said to bear mystic powers, blessing the custodian king with immense wealth, power and grandeur. According to the Burañjī-s, these images of the two deities were given to the forefathers of Siu Kā Phā by god Lengdon. Siu Kā Phā then brought the deities along with him to Assam. The worship and veneration of Chumdeo/ Somdeo and Shengdeo was a very significant and important responsibility of the Āhom kings.

Regarding the form of Chumdeo, it has been said that its form does not resemble that of any known deity. Also, it has not been identified with any deity of the Hindu, Buddhist and the Chinese and Far eastern religions. But it has been said to possess the shape of a heron, and in some cases, identified with that of a dragon (Gogoi, P., 1976, 8). The Chumdeo was carefully kept and guarded in a temple or a *Deoghar* (house of God) and it was indispensable in any important ritual related to kingship, mainly the ritual coronation ceremony or *Singari Ghar Uthā*.

Apart from Chum-Sheng, the Āhom religion has a very large pantheon of other gods goddesses and spirits. These numerous gods and goddesses are not found to be worshipped through material anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or theriomorphic images, unlike Hinduism and Buddhism (mainly of the Mahāyana and Tāntric Vajrāyana types). The Āhoms started to revere and worship images of anthropomorphic and theriomorphic forms of deities only after they came in contact with Hinduism and started accepting it as their new religious faith. The numerous gods and spirits in Āhom religion are to be propitiated for protection, general welfare and cure from evil, inflictions and illnesses (Gogoi, P., 1976, 12). Lengdon, in particular was the principal and ancestral god of the Āhom rulers. Lengdon is considered as the divine progenitor of the Āhom or Tāi Āhom race and he was worshipped along with other gods and spirits in a grand annual ceremony. Several animals and birds were sacrificed to him and the other accompanying deities and spirits. The grand annual ritual worship of Lengdon and other deities was known as *Umphā Pūjā* and it is still celebrated in certain pockets of eastern or Upper Assam (12). The main pedestal and sacrificial altar of *Umphā Pūjā* was originally at Carāideo during the reign of Siu-Kā Phā but it was later transferred to a place known as Amlakhi Rangagarah, also in Sivasagar district (12). *Umphā Pūjā* is still performed here, in this place, but in a miniscule form.

Besides Umphā Pūjā, there were several other ritual observances in the Āhom religion, many of which have either become extinct in the present day due to the Āhoms' acceptance of Hinduism and other allied religious traditions and cults, or, are performed in a miniature form by the traditional Āhom priests known as Deodhāi-s, Bāilung-s and Mohan-s. These three priestly classes upto this day, have been keeping alive the original Āhom religion, its texts and ritual practices. The highly venerated texts of the Āhom religion like the *Minmang Phuralung* (Basu, 1970, 223-224), and their ideals have been preserved by the above priestly classes, who, in the present day, are mostly found settled in the districts of Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji in eastern Assam. The above three classes of priests are seen continuing the performances of ritual worship and sacrifices of the original Āhom religion at the shrines known as *Deośāl*-s which are spread across eastern Assam.

The *Phurālung Puja* is yet another important ritual ceremony which consists of only vegetarian offerings. There is also a type of ritual observance in Ahom religion known as *Rik- Khan/ Rik- Khan- Mong- Khan* which was performed by kings after gaining victory against enemies in great battles or wars. It was a ceremony of invoking higher powers for granting long life to the kings, prosperity and glory to the state or country (Gogoi, P., 1976, 13).

Some of the most important deities/ spirits in the pantheon of the Āhom religion are- *Pha- tu- Ching* who is the highest being or Almighty, *Khun-theu-Kham*, *Khrai-Pha-rung-Kham*, *Lengdon*, *Pha-but-rum-Shang-dam*, *Phri- Nat- Yao*, *Jasingpha*, *Langkuri/ Nangkuri- Na- Kham*, *Pha- Pin- Bet*, *Ai- A- Nang*, *Chang- Dam* (Gogoi, P., 1976, 5-6), and several household deities etc. There are no known literary texts in the Āhom religion that describes the form of these deities, as the tradition of worshipping the material image of deities or Mūrti-s/ Vighraha-s/ Bimba-s is totally found to be absent here. Though the Āhoms turned towards the different traditions and sects of Hinduism from the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards, the traditions of ritual worship of the above deities did not wane and kept continued along with the practices of Hinduism. Ancestor worship has been a very important practice in the Āhom religion, like that of Hinduism. Offerings should be made to the spirits of the ancestors at prescribed days of the year. Mostly, these offerings include sacrifice of fowls, eggs and other food items.

## **2.2 Hinduization of Ahoms and the Acceptance of Hinduism by the Ahoms**

### **2.2 (a) The Influence and Acceptance of the various Folk or Laukika traditions of Hinduism prevalent in Assam by the Ahoms-**

According to Basu (1970, 225), “*both accidental circumstances and deliberate policy coupled with broad outlook and adaptable nature were responsible for the Hinduization of the Ahoms*”. The Āhoms, liberal in their outlook merged into the already existing populace and ethnic culture of Assam through different means. The majority of the communities residing in Assam during that time followed the Purāṇic and Tāntric forms of Hinduism and several folk cults and belief systems which are styled as Tantric or included mainly under the Tāntric, Śākta and Śaiva systems. Many of these cults and belief systems are still kept survived and they can be categorized as Laukika traditions of Hinduism. Two examples of such cults were the cult of goddess *Kecāikhāitī* and *Buḍhā- Buḍhī* practiced by the Deurīs Kacārī-s and Cutiyā-s, who were the dominant power in eastern Assam until the advent of the Āhoms. The Āhoms, during the period of reign of Siu- Kā- Phā are said to first accept the practice of worship of goddess *Kecāikhāitī*, who was the tutelary or clan goddess of the Cutiyā-s and also Deurīs . There are folkloric accounts of how Siu Kā Phā encountered *Kecāikhāitī* in the form of a dark skinned, long haired woman busy stealing the fish stuck in the bamboo baits and consuming them at night (Chetia, 1976, 5-6). According to a folklore prevalent amongst the Deurīs, Āhom king Gadādhara Simha, during his exile, saw the goddess *Kecāikhāitī* as a tall, long haired woman or a spirit, having a fearful countenance, with long nails and protruding eyes, carrying an infant in her lap and busy in consuming the fish stuck in the bamboo baits known as *Cepā* in Assamese. This narrative will be further discussed in the section 4.4 of Chapter 4. Another significant Laukika tradition that was appropriated by the Āhoms in Assam during the period of Siu- Kā- Phā was that centred around the worship of Lakhimī/ Lakṣmī- the presiding goddess of agriculture, food, fertility and bounty. It is also said sometimes that the practice of venerating Lakhimī or Lakhimī Sabāh, which is till now observed as a very important ritual practice amongst the communities in eastern Assam, was actually introduced in Assam by the Āhoms during Siu- Kā- Phā’s times .

## **2.2 (b) The Contact of the Āhoms with the Mainstream/ Core Purāṇic and Tāntric systems of Hinduism-**

The Āhoms were first introduced to the mainstream Vaidika, Paurāṇika and Tāntrika forms, or Śāstric forms of Hinduism during the reign of king Siu-Dāng-Phā during the late 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. Until then, the Āhoms, particularly the Āhom court was following their original religion and were beginning to adopt the different village, tribal or sylvan religious cult practices of the region which can be identified as Laukika or folk forms of Hinduism, or folk forms of Śaktism and Śaivism. Siu-Dāng-phā, according to the narrative accounts of the Burañjī-s was brought up in a Brāhmin household and so he came to be known as *Bāmunī Konvar* which translates to ‘Brāhmin prince’ in Assamese. It was only during his reign that a *Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇa Śāligrāma* is said to have entered into the altar or shrine of the Āhom royal household (Gohain, 2011, 79). After Siu-Dāng-Phā, the succeeding Āhom kings like Siu-Seng Phā or Pratāp Siṃha and Jayadhvaj Siṃha started to profoundly come under the fold of Purāṇic/ Brāhmaṇical/ Smārṭa and Tāntric systems of Hinduism. Jayadhvaj Siṃha was the first Āhom king to formally accept mainstream Hinduism (Basu, 1970, 225). From the time of the above kings, the tradition of acquiring a Sanskrit Hindu name bearing the ‘Siṃha’ alongside the original Āhom names amongst the Āhom kings initiated and it continued till the climax of the Āhom kingdom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE.

## **2.2 (c) Acceptance and Patronage of the Mainstream Hindu systems/ traditions by the Āhoms-**

Jayadhvaj Siṃha took initiation into Vaiṣṇava sect and he patronized the establishment of the Āuniātī Sattrā at Majuli in eastern Assam (Gohain, 2011, 82). After Jayadhvaj Siṃha, kings like Ratnadhvaj Siṃha or Siu-Lik-Phā, also known as *Lorā Rajā* ( boy king ) also took initiation in Vaiṣṇavism. The kings who took initiation under Vaiṣṇavism, particularly the neo- Vaiṣṇava sect propounded by the saint Śankardeva and particularly his spiritual successor Dāmodaradeva in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE patronized the building of several Sattrā-s or neo- Vaiṣṇava monasteries and also temples dedicated to Viṣṇu/ Vāsudeva/ Kṛṣṇa. They gave lavish grants to these Sattrā-s for their development. Siu Lik Phā is said to have commissioned the building of the

Vāsudeva or Bāsudev Doul in modern day Sonitpur district of central Assam (Neog, 2008a, 233).

According to the Burañjī-s and prevalent local narratives, the tyrannical reign of Lorā Rajā and his chief general Lāluk Solā Barphukan was usurped by Siu-Pāt-Phā or Gadādhār Simha who belonged to the *Tungkhungiā* branch or clan of the Āhoms, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. Gadādhār Simha is said to have not formally accepted any mainstream Purāṇic or Tāntric tradition/system of Hinduism, but, he is said to have leanings towards the various traditions of Śaiva and Śakti/ Devī worship prevalent in Assam during the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. He allowed the celebration of Durga Puja in the Ahom capital (Gogoi, L., 1994, 257). He is said to have patronized the building of the present temple building of Umānanda Śiva located at the island known as Bhasmācala in midst of the Brahmaputra river in Guwahati. Gadādhār Simha, unlike the previous monarchs, considered “*Vaisnavism to be too passive and mild for a ruling class like the Ahoms required to maintain their domination and sovereignty by the force of arms*” (Basu, 1970, 225). In the folklore associated with the shrine known as Kāka Gosānī Thān located near the periphery of the Kaziranga National Park in the Golaghat district of eastern Assam, it is said that the image or Mūrti/ Vīgraha of a goddess worshipped as Kāka Gosānī was once kept in a small casket made of the ‘Kāka’ variety of bamboo and worn on the chest by Gadādhār Simha, when he was on his exile, and before he presided as the king of the Āhom kingdom (Bardaloi, 2007, 195). The priests of the shrine say that the image or Mūrti worshipped as Kāka Gosānī is of a *Caturbhujā* or four handed Devī/ goddess. According to the documented folkloric accounts, it is said that this image was offered daily worship by Gadādhār Simha and then again kept inside the casket. He, at some point of time left the casket along with the image on a tree (196). The present shrine is said to be located in that place where the bamboo casket along with the image was found. The Mūrti/ Vīgraha or image came to be popularly known and revered as Kāka Gosānī (197) by the local folk. It is because it was found inside the casket made of Kāka bamboo or Kāka Bāh ( Bāh means bamboo in Assamese ), and might be the form of the image was identified with some known or widely worshipped Devī or Gosānī ( goddess as known in Assamese ), mainly Durgā or Caṇḍikā. Presently, in the Kāka Gosānī shrine, the main worship is offered to Durgā. The image of Kāka Gosānī, presently, cannot be seen and may be kept covered in

the main altar of the shrine, due to which, its exact identity cannot be known. As it has been worshipped through the Purāṇic and Tāntric ritual codes of Durgā's worship, it has to be inferred that it features one of the numerous forms of Durgā. If the Mūrti/ Vighraha or image of Kāka Gosānī is surely of one of the aspects of Durgā, then it will mean that Gadādhara Śiṃha might have initiated himself at some phase of his life into the Paurāṇika or Tāntrika systems of Śakti worship. He might have himself practiced the rituals advocated by these systems, rather than just supporting or patronizing them. More deeper study is required in this regard, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. The image known as Kāka Gosānī may be of another goddess like Tārā which has been a major goddess in the original ancestral Āhom faith or religious system. There are also evidences of salutations to goddess Tārā featuring on the coins issued by the king Siu-Klen-Mung preceding Gadādhara Śiṃha (Basu, 1970, 29). Tārā is known as the reigning goddess of Tibet and far-Eastern regions (China) and her cult has been shared by both the Hindu and Buddhist Tāntric traditions. She has numerous forms and she has remained an important goddess in the original Āhom religion which is also rooted in the far-Eastern region. As Gadādhara Śiṃha, as per accounts of the Burañjī-s, is said not to have come under Hindu fold and was practicing his ancestral religion, the Mūrti/ Vighraha known as Kāka Gosānī which is said to have been worn by him and offered worshipped can be rather identified as representing Tārā or any other goddess of the Āhom religion. It will be more clear if the Mūrti is revealed and unveiled by the temple authorities for the purpose of research. If the Mūrti is of a goddess like Tārā, then it will mean that a tradition of worshipping sculpted metal or stone images of deities might be in existence in the original Āhom religion. Detailed study and exploration need to be done regarding this, which is beyond the scope of the study in this thesis.

## **2.2 (d) Gradual absorption of the Āhoms into Purāṇic and Tāntric Hinduism**

From Gadādhara Śiṃha/ Siu-Pāt-Phā started the reign of the Tungkhungīā clan of Āhoms. After Gadādhara Śiṃha, his son Siu-Khrung-Phā or Rudra Śiṃha ascended on the throne in the later part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE. The reign of Rudra Śiṃha is marked as the period when the prowess and grandeur of the Āhom kingdom reached its zenith. From his reign, the complete Hinduization and absorption of the Āhoms into Hinduism began. Rudra Śiṃha is said to have taken initiation into the Pañcākṣara Śiva Mantra or Śaiva Mantra system from Guru Padmanābha Bhattacharya



or Mukalimuriā Gosāin . Some other historical accounts say that Rudra Simha took Sarana or initiation to Vaiṣṇavism under Harideo Bāpu of the Śrī Āuniati Sattra, Majuli, but he continued to make Śiva Lingas from 1 *Ser* clay or earth and worship them (Gogoi, L., 1994, 248). This shows his immense devotion towards Śiva and Śaivism, and also towards his understanding of the concept of oneness of Hari ( Viṣṇu ) and Hara ( Siva ) continuing in the culture of Kāmrupa or Assam (Sarma, H.C., Bhattacharya, H.M., 1982, 8). He caused the building of the temple of Ranganātha Śiva or Ranganātha Doul at Rangpur in Sivasagar district [ **Appendix 2 : Figure (i)** ]. He fully absorbed himself into the Purāṇic and Tāntric systems, and settled several families of Brāhmins from Kannauj, Mithila, Kashmir and Bengal in the Āhom kingdom. He gifted lands and immense wealth and grants to these families and appointed their male members as priests in several temples built under his patronage and also in the temples of the preceding periods rebuilt by him and his Hinduized predecessors. Under the aegis of the Āhom court presided by Rudra Simha, several forms of art, and architecture attained a new form in Assam. His eclectic and all encompassing attitude introduced new elements in the culture of the Āhoms as well in the overall culture of Assam. Rudra Simha remained a staunch Śaiva during the early phases of his life, but, he never gave up the practices of his ancestral religion. He also patronized the Vaiṣṇava Sattras and made several grants to them. Rudra Simha, circa 1679 CE, commissioned the building of the five temples or Douls to Keśavarāi Viṣṇu, Baidyanātha Siva, Devī, Ganeśa and Sūrya on the banks of the tank known as Jaysāgar in Sivasagar district. It is said that from the reign of Rudra Simha, the Āhoms started to build temples/ Douls to the Pañcdevatā or the five major sectarian deities or godheads in Hinduism- Śiva, Viṣṇu, Devī, Ganeśa and Sūrya (Gogoi, L., 1994, 248) . The Jaysāgar tank was also dug under his patronage and it is one of the largest man-made freshwater water bodies in Asia. The practice of constructing large freshwater tanks and erecting temples/ Douls to the major Hindu deities on their banks continued till the end of reign of the Āhom kings in Assam. Each of the temples or Douls that will be considered in this thesis are situated on the bank of a tank or a water body. Not all the temples built on the banks of Jaysāgar have survived the ravages of time. In the present day, only the temples to Keśavarāi Viṣṇu, Baidyanātha Śiva and Devī are to be seen intact but gradually bearing the signs of erosion, mutilation and damage due to unplanned unscientific preservation. Rudra Simha, is said to have composed a version of Śiva Purāṇa and

several verses and hymns to Śiva and his consort Gaurī/ Durgā. His liberal patronage of fine arts and music caused the introduction of the tradition of northern Indian Hindusthānī classical music of the contemporary period into the culture of Assam. He himself was a connoisseur of music (251) and composed several lyrical compositions which are known to be lost. The regional music and performing art forms of Assam during the 17<sup>th</sup> century- early 18<sup>th</sup> century CE attained a high platform during Rudra Simha's able reign. Several offices were created by him for supervising and supporting the different forms of arts and other cultural practices that were coming to an eclectic confluence in Assam under his reign.

Rudra Simha became drawn towards Śaktism during the later or last phases of his life. It was during this phase, i.e. circa 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, that a renowned Śākta Brāhmin priest and scholar known as Kṛṣṇarām Nyāyavāgīśa or Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya from Śantipur in Nadia region of undivided Bengal came to the Āhom kingdom. There are also mentions of a village known as Simulia Gram on the banks of the river Ganga as the home of Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya in the *Naobaisha Phukan Buranji* (Tamuli, 2019, 133). Rudra Simha, before his death, established Kṛṣṇarām as the Parbatīyā Gosāin or the head priest or law maker/ administrator of the Kāmākhyā Pītha at Nīlācala in Guwahati (134). The establishment of Kṛṣṇarām Nyāyavāgīśa as the Parbatīyā Gosāin was not taken positively by the Kāmrupiyā Brāhmin priests and also the Sādhakas of the Pītha who were already officiating there. These Brāhmins claim their descent from the Brāhmins of Kannauj and Mithilā settled by the king Narakāsura<sup>1</sup>. There are also claims that their forefathers belonged to the time of *Matsyendranātha* or *Mahāsiddha Luipā*<sup>2</sup>, who is said to have attained the knowledge of the Tāntric *Kaula* doctrine at Nīlācala from the Yoginī mothers and to have preached the *Kaulācāra* system at the Kāmākhyā Pītha. Matsyendranāthā is said to have authored the text *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* which is an indispensable part of Tāntric Kulācāra practices. Parbatīyā Gosāin Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya, himself an accomplished Kālī Sādhaka or an adept worshipper of goddess Kālī introduced several new codes of worship in the Pītha. He became the law maker at the Pītha and he might have absorbed or included or absorbed the system of worship of Kāmākhyā in the Kālī Krama or the Kālī Kula school of Śaktism<sup>3</sup>, which had its origins in Bengal. He also brought in a Smārta system of worship to Assam (Gogoi, L., 1994, 257) which was introduced by the *Smārta Nibandhakāra* Raghunandana in Bengal back in around 15<sup>th</sup>

or 16<sup>th</sup> century CE. Rudra Simha, before his death, is said to have advised his son Śiva Simha to take initiation into Śaktism from Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya and accept him as his Guru. Śiva Simha, who ascended the throne in circa 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, obeying the words of his deceased father, took initiation into Śaktism from Kṛṣṇarām and accepted him as his Rājguru or the royal priest. He established him as the chief royal priest as well as his adviser, much to the dismay of the Āhom priests like the Deodhāi-s and Bailung-s, and also the Brāhmin priest-scholars following the ancient Kāmṛūpiā systems (may be the Kāmṛūpiā Smārta systems) of Śaktism, Śaivism and Gāṇapatya (Gogoi, L., 1994, 259). The queens of Śiva Simha, mainly his first queen Phuleśvarī Kunvarī, the high officials, nobles and ministers of the Āhom court also took initiation into Śaktism under Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya. Śiva Simha, his queens, chiefly Phuleśvarī Kunvarī or Pramatheśvarī Devī and his second queen Ambikā Kunvarī were instrumental in making Śaktism as the official religion or faith of the Āhom kingdom and a symbol of Āhom dominance and sovereignty. Under their reign, major temples to the worship of Devī/ Śakti and Śiva in union with Śakti as his consort were built and the ancient ruined temples resurrected and rebuilt. Lavish grants were made to the Brāhmins, their families and arrangements were made for learning of Śastra-s and Sanskrit knowledge systems. Several classical Sanskrit works like Ānanda Laharī by Ādi Śankarācharya were translated to Assamese and several treatises dealing with different subjects were composed under the patronage of the Āhom court. Huge lands were donated to the temples and their worship modelled according to the codes and principles introduced by Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya. Kṛṣṇarām and his ideologies and principles of Hindu worship, mainly Śakti or Devī worship had started to profoundly influence Śiva Simha, his queens, mainly Phuleśvarī Kunvarī and the high nobility of the Āhom court during the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE which to a great extent diminished the significance of the ancestral Āhom religion and its practices, though they were kept continued. The Āhom priests and practitioners of the Āhom religion are said to have been given a backseat resulting in an atmosphere of disbelief.

After the period of reign of Śiva Simha and his queens, the succeeding Āhom rulers like Pramatta Simha, Rajeśvar Simha, Gaurīnāth Simha etc. also accepted different traditions of Purāṇic and Tāntric Hinduism and built, resurrected and repaired numerous temples and Sattras across Assam. Some of the significant temples built by

the above rulers are at Guwahati and the regions neighbouring it namely Śukreśvar Devālaya, Janārdana Devālaya, Rudreśvar Devālaya, Maṇikarneśvar Devālaya, Catrākār Devālaya, Hatīmura Durga Devālaya, Baśisthāśram Devālaya, Parihareśvar Devālaya and Bilveśvar Devālaya. Most of these temples are rebuilt versions of earlier demolished or ruined temples dating back to approximately 8<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The first deity of Hinduism who became profoundly accepted and venerated by the Āhoms in their process of Hinduization was Śiva. Śiva has been worshipped in many forms in the folk/ village traditions of Hinduism. One of the prominent aspects in which Śiva has been venerated in the folk and ethnic cultures of Assam is Buḍhā Gosāi. The Āhoms also appropriated the practice of Buḍhā Gosāin worship from the other neighbouring cultures like the Cutiyās or the Deurīs. *Dibaṅgiyā Deurī-s*, a branch of the *Deurī-s* have been worshipping *Kuṇḍi- Māmā/ Girā- Girācī/ Buḍhā- Buḍhī / Buḍhā Gosain- Buḍhi Gosānī* since remote past<sup>4</sup>. Buḍhā- Buḍhī has, in the course of history got identified as Śiva- Pārvatī and the worship of this divine couple has been forming the cultural identity of the Deurīs and Cutiyās as a whole. Amongst the Āhoms, Śiva or Buḍhā Gosāin equates with the revered deity Lāngkurī or Nāngkurī of the original Āhom religion (Gogoi, P., 1976, 5). Śiva has been worshipped by the Āhoms along with his consort Pārvatī/ Gaurī/Durgā. King Rudra Simha and his succeeding kings even are found to have struck coins which mention of themselves as servants of Śiva- Pārvatī /Gaurī- Śankara/ Umā- Maheśvara. As evident, the Āhoms built more temples to Śiva than any other Hindu deity. Even after worship of Śakti or Devī as the supreme principle acquired the prime place amongst the Āhoms during the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, the worship of Śiva did not wane, it continued. The tallest and grandest of all temples built by the Āhoms- the Śiva Doul on the banks of the tank known as Bar Pukhurī or Sivasagar in the midst of the Sivasagar town, is dedicated to the worship of Śiva in union with his consort Gaurī/ Pārvatī/ Durgā. Other significant temples dedicated to the worship of Śiva built by the Ahoms located within Sivasagar district are the Gaurīsāgar Śiva Doul, Gaurīballabh Doul, Hara Gaurī Doul, Na- Pukhuri Śiva Doul etc.

Apart from identifying the deity Lāngkurī or Lāngkurī Deo with Śiva, the Āhoms, under the influence of the Hindu priests and clergy, also began to identify or equate the other deities of their ancestral religion with Hindu deities, for e.g. their ancestral

god/ divine ancestor Lengdon with Indra, Jāsingphā with Sarasvatī, Khāo Khām or Phyun with Varuṇa (Gogoi, P., 1976, 4-5) etc. This has been done considering the supposed similarities of attributes between each of the deities of both the religious systems. The cosmological concepts of the Āhom religion are also seen as somewhat similar to that of cosmological concepts elaborated in the Hindu Purāṇic literature like the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Vāmana Purāṇa etc. The Āhom deity Khun-theu-Khām can be compared with Nārāyaṇa Viṣṇu lying on the cosmic ocean (2). The motifs of eight hooded snake and tortoise in Āhom cosmology (1) can be equated with *Ananta/ Śeṣa* and *Kurmapītha* respectively.

The Āhom rulers were declared *Indravamśī-s* by the Brahmin priests because their ancestral god Lengdon was started to be identified with Indra. Lengdon according to Āhom mythology, is the ruler of heaven and he has a large council of other deities. Indra is also said to be the ruler of the heavenly city known as Amarāvati according to the narratives in the Hindu Purāṇic literature. According to the genealogical accounts of kings mentioned in the Purāṇa-s and traditional Hindu historical accounts, there are two prime lines of earthly kings - one descended from the sun god or Sūrya known as *Sūryavamśī-s*, and other descended from the moon god known as *Candravamśī-s*. There are also kings who trace their ancestry from fire god or Agni (*Agnivamśī-s*) and serpent deities or Naga-s (*Nagavamśī-s*). The Āhoms became to be recognized as the only royalty on earth who claim their descent from Indra (Gogoi, P., 1976, 4). .

### **2.3 Śaktism/ Śākta Hinduism and the Āhoms :**

#### **2.3 (a) The Influence and Acceptance of the Folk/ Village traditions of Devī/ Śakti/ goddess worship prevalent in Assam by the Āhoms-**

The Āhoms, during their initial phases, came in contact with the folk or village traditions/ Laukika traditions of Śakti or Devī worship in Assam practiced by the Cutiyā-s, Deurīs, Kacārī-s and other Indo- Mongoloid ethnic communities in eastern Assam. These traditions of Śakti worship are included under the Tāntric systems. One of such traditions is the worship of *Kecāikhāitī*- a fierce mother goddess who likes offerings of warm blood, flesh, sweets, strong foods and liquor. *Kecāikhāitī* is

often identified as *Tīkṣṇakāntā* described in the *Kālikā Purāṇa*. It mentions of *Tīkṣṇakāntā* as one of the two major forms of *Dikkaravāsinī* or the aspect of goddess *Kāmākhyā* or *Durgā* who presides in the eastern corner of *Kāmrūpa* or Assam/ eastern Assam known as *Saumārapītha*. She is none other than *Kālī*, *Tārā*, *Ugratārā* and *Ekajatā* (Shastri, B., 1994, 97, 63-67). *Kecāikhāitī* was and has remained the tutelary goddess of the *Deurīs* and *Cutiya-s*. The *Āhoms* subjugated the *Cutiya-s* during the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE and as a result also came into contact with their numerous cultural practices. They appropriated these practices in their own way. According to folklore prevalent in certain regions of eastern Assam, goddess *Kecāikhāitī* or *Kecāikhāitī Gosāni*, though the presiding goddess of the *Cutiya* kingdom, came in favour of the *Āhoms* because of the influential personality and divine aura of king *Siu Kā Phā* and the assurance he provided to offer the goddess a live human as sacrifice or *Bali* to her (Chetia, 2017, 5-6). Such types of folk stories indicate that *Āhoms* got drawn towards the regional traditions of *Śakti* or goddess worship prevalent in Assam at a very early phase of their rule, during the days of *Siu- Ka- Pha's* reign. The tutelary goddess of the *Deurīs* and *Cutiya-s* coming into the favour of the *Āhoms* and blessing them with an uninterrupted rule and dominance for 600 years (5-6), according to the folkloric narratives, can be understood as a connotation of their ability, grandeur, prowess and the wit by which they not only subjugated their neighbouring kingdoms and clans, but also accepted and absorbed their beliefs and merged into the cultural milieu of the land they set their foot in, i.e. Assam which they called *Mung- Dun- Chun- Khām* or the 'golden land'.

The tradition of worship of goddess *Kecāikhāitī* was not at all a mild form of worship as it included such rituals and offerings like blood, flesh, human sacrifices, strong foods, intoxicants that symbolize death, killing and vigorous energy. There are several milder forms of worship in the folk *Śaktism* of Assam that were also accepted by the *Āhoms* during the initial phases of their establishment in Assam. One such practice is the worship of the goddess of agriculture, bounty and fertility known as *Lakhimī*, who can be identified with *Lakṣmī* as *Dhānya Lakṣmī* or the presiding *Lakṣmī* of food, paddy, bounty and fertility. The annual ritual practice of venerating *Lakhimī* known as *Lakhimī Sabāh* has been a very important observance amongst the communities in eastern Assam, who are all, basically agrarian. It is said that *Siu- Kā-*

Phā first organized Lakhimī Sabāh or Lakhimī Pūjā at a Deośāl in Carāideo in the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE (Hakacham, 2018, 291). Either, Siu- Kā- Phā and the other Āhoms during that time had adopted the practice of worshipping Lakhimī from the neighbouring Cutiyā-s and Kacārī-s, or, a practice of worshipping a goddess similar to Lakhimī was there amongst the Āhoms even before they came to Assam. As the Āhoms were basically an agrarian community and they are sometimes reputed to have brought in the practice of wet-rice cultivation from their homelands in the Sino-Tibetan and Sino- Burmese region, a practice or belief system centring around a goddess of fertility and food might have already existed in their culture, even before they came to Assam and interacted with the ethnic communities here. There are goddesses of agriculture, food and wealth in every community within the Indo-Chinese region which are related genetically as well as culturally to the Āhoms. These goddesses are identified with Lakṣmī of Hinduism and Vasudharā of Buddhism. Two of such goddesses are *Nang Kwak* and *Pho-Sop*, widely venerated in Thailand [ **Appendix 2 : Figure (ii) and (iii)** ]. The rituals in the Lakhimī Sabāh/ Lakhimī Pūjā/ Laokhimi Pūjā observed by the Ahoms have certain similarities with that observed by the other neighbouring communities like the Cutiyā-s. The Āhoms, initially carried out the rituals of Lakhimī Sabāh in their shrines known as Deośāls. But, after they came under the fold of the mainstream traditions of Hinduism, the observance of Lakhimī Sabāh shifted from the Deośāls to Nāmghar-s or Vaiṣṇava shrines and Devālaya-s. The rituals of Lakhimī Sabāh includes congregational singing of songs known as *Lakhimī Ādarā Nām* by womenfolk. In the Lakhimi Ādarā Nām of the Āhoms, there can be found a wonderful amalgamation of the Hindu and the Āhom lore. *Ai- A- Nang*, a goddess in the original Āhom religion has also been identified with the Laksmī of mainstream Purāṇic and Tāntric Hinduism (Gogoi, P., 1976, 5). Another goddess of the folk Śākta tradition of Assam to be adopted by the Āhoms is Subacanī. Subacanī is equated with none other than Durgā and has been worshipped by the Āhoms as *Buḍhī Subacanī* or *Hubacanī*- an embodiment of supreme energy and creation (Gogoi, L., 1994, 257). The accepted form of Subacanī in mainstream Hinduism is described in the text known as *Śabdakalpadruma*<sup>5</sup> [ **Appendix 2 : Figure (iv)** ]. Almost all the material images of Subacanī crafted and worshipped in the present day are seen to conform to the description in the Sabdakalpadruma. Though having similar sounding names, the Subacanī/ Hubacanī worshipped by the Āhoms is totally different from the Subacanī worshipped in the cultures of western or

lower Assam and Bengal (257). The form of Subacani worshipped in lower Assam and Bengal is mostly seen in accordance to the Śabdakalpadruma.

The Āhoms also appropriated the beliefs and practices centring on Āi or Āi Sakal, a goddess or a group of goddesses addressed by the common epithet. The goddess or goddesses known as Āi or Āi Sakal are patrons and presiding deities of several epidemics, the prime of them being pox. The tradition of worship of Āi is kept continued in the folk culture of Assam till today. Amongst the folk Śākta traditions practiced in Assam, this tradition is seen to be spread across a larger region. In eastern Assam, the Cutiyā-s have been observing elaborate rituals invoking Āi/ Ai Sakal. Apart from the Cutiyā-s the tradition of worship of Āi is also found in other communities within Assam. The number of goddesses worshipped as Āi or Ai Sakal are seen to vary from seven to twelve depending on the culture or the community. In most cases, there are seen to be seven or nine goddesses bearing the epithet Āi. Āi means mother or mother goddess in Assamese. All these goddesses, though attached with malevolent attributes like bringers of diseases and suffering, are represented in the folk culture also as loving and protective mothers. As hinted in the songs known as Āi Nām sung by women during the ritual of Āi Sabāh or worship of Āi/ Ai Sakal, the Āi goddess or goddesses get immediately satisfied and turn benevolent when invoked with pure devotion, if pleaded and asked for forgiveness by the devotees, and offered certain varieties of white flowers, and particular food items, which are required to be white in colour too. The conceptions of Āi/ Āi Sakal in the folk culture of Assam can be said as almost akin to that of Mātṛkā-s in mainstream Śaktism and Hārītī in Buddhism. The prime Mātṛkā-s are either seven, eight, nine or even more in number and they too bear a combination of malevolent and benevolent characteristics. The goddess or goddesses invoked and worshipped as Āi are being conceived none other than Durgā, Kālī, Kāmākhyā of mainstream Purāṇic and Tāntric Śaktism. Most of the Āi Nām-s available to us in the present day include visualizations and imageries from the Purāṇic Śākta literature like Devī Māhātmyam or Caṇḍī, which may hint towards an attempt to absorb the narratives of Āi into the Purāṇic and Tāntric systems. Further, the different types of objects and accessories, aspects of material culture described in these Āi Nām-s connote towards a possibility that they might have been composed during the reign of the Āhoms or under the influence of the Āhom court. Āi as a single goddess is also frequently identified with



Śītalā, another folk goddess who has been already absorbed into the Purāṇic and Tāntric system. Śītalā has been discussed in the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, a Purāṇic text established as a Mahāpurāṇa and believed to have been composed circa 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century CE.

### **2.3 (c) The Influence of the mainstream Purāṇic and Tāntric traditions of Devī/Śakti worship on the Āhoms-**

As mentioned earlier, the Āhoms first came into contact with the mainstream, canonical or codified forms or systems of Śaktism, Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism prevalent in Assam during the rule of king Siu-Dāṅ-phā or Bāmuṇī Konvar in the 14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. He was the first Āhom king who gave patronage and importance to Brāhmins. There are several copper plate grants of the Āhom court under king Siu-Dāṅ-phā preserved at the District Museum of Sonitpur at Tezpur in central Assam, which contain inscriptions speaking of these being donated to a Brāhmin named Padmanābha [ **Appendix 2 : Figure (v)** ]. Siu-Dāṅ-Phā established the members of the Brāhmin family where he was brought up and nurtured, at high respectable positions in the Āhom court. Centuries after Siu-Dāṅ-Phā, king Siu-Seng-Phā or Pratāp Simha, knowing about the elaborate celebrations of the rituals of goddess Durgā at the royal house of the Koches at Koch Behar or Kamatā kingdom, sent artisans from the Āhom kingdom to the Koch kingdom to learn the art of crafting the clay images of goddess Durgā, and also the intricacies of her ritual worship and the corresponding celebrations. The artisans led by one Marangiyāl Khanikar (Basu, 1970, 329) is said to have learnt the art of making the clay images of Durgā and other deities, and crafted them after they returned to the Āhom kingdom. Pratāp Simha started the tradition of elaborate ritual worship of the clay image of goddess Durgā in the Āhom royal house. The tradition of large scale public celebration in honour of goddess Durgā amongst the Āhom royalty started from Pratāp Simha and it also marked the introduction of the tradition of worship and crafting material images of Hindu deities for ritual worship in the culture of the Āhoms. The first seed of influence of Purāṇic and Tāntric systems of Śaktism amongst the Āhoms was thus sown during the days of Pratāp Simha.

### **2.3 (d) Acceptance and Patronage of Śaktism by the rulers of the Tungkhungiā clan of Āhoms, and Rise of Śaktism as a state religion**

After Pratāp Siṁha, the growing tree of Śaktism was watered and nurtured by king Gadādhara Siṁha or Siu-Pāt-Phā of the Tungkhungīā clan. Though he is said to have never taken up any form of Hinduism, he was extremely drawn towards patronizing and promoting the Śākta and Śaiva forms of worship. He worshipped Śiva as Lāngkuri in the original Āhom way and also employed Brāhmins and initiates for the Vaidika, Paurāṇika and Tāntrika worship of Śiva. He caused the building, rebuilding and resurrection of numerous major and minor shrines of worship of Śiva as Lāngkuri and Śaktī across the length and breadth of Assam. At first he was very much hostile towards the neo-Vaiṣṇava institutions, but in his later part of life, he patronized and provided support to them.

The proliferating tree of Śaktism and Śākta influence was kept continuously nurtured by his successor king Rudra Siṁha who advocated and stressed for the complete reformation of Śākta as well as Śaiva worship in Assam. He kept continued the tradition of the ceremonial worship of Durgā started by his ancestor Pratāp Siṁha and further caused the enrichment of its rituals and corresponding ceremonies. He composed several hymns eulogizing the beauty and glory of the goddess Durgā. He set these hymns to particular Rāga-s of Hindusthāni classical music. Only some of these hymns are available now.

The influence of Śaktism became more profound amongst the Āhom royalty after Rudra Siṁha in the mid and later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE. Śiva Siṁha or Siu-Tān-Phā, his son, as said earlier, initiated himself into the Śākta system under the Śākta Brāhmin priest Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya. Śiva Siṁha married Phuleśvarī or Phulmatī, an accomplished temple dancer or Nati or a Deodhanī hailing from a village known as Cinatali in modern day Golaghat district in eastern Assam (Bhuyan, 2012, 40). She rose to be the chief Kunvarī or the queen. She came to be known as Phuleśvari Kunvarī. She too, took initiation into the Śākta system under Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya and was named Pramathēśvarī Devī- another name of Durgā. She was far more drawn towards Śaktism than her husband and was profoundly passionate towards it. According to some popular or folk accounts, she became an accomplished Śakti Upāsaka and had almost attained the aura similar to that of Ambikā/ Durgā. Phuleśvarī Kunvarī / Pramathēśvarī Devī was made Bar Rajā or the chief regnant obeying some astral predictions of Śiva Siṁha's Catrabhanga or a possible loss of sovereignty and authority. The court astrologers predicted a possible upcoming

calamity or misfortune that might befall on king Śiva Simha as well as the Āhom kingdom. They suggested the king to establish his chief queen as Bar Rajā and to rule the kingdom along with her. Phuleśvarī Kunvarī, after becoming the Bar Rajā struck coins bearing her name independently as well as some bearing her name along with that of her husband. Some of these coins are currently seen preserved in the collection of the Sonitpur District Museum at Tezpur [ **Appendix 2 : Figure (vi)** ]. She resolved to make Śaktism the official faith of the Ahom kingdom or state. An ardent patron of Śaktism and all the forms of worship that are centred on Devīs/ Śaktīs/ mother goddesses as the supreme principle, she patronized the building of several temples for the worship of Śakti in the form of Durgā/ Bhavānī/ Gaurī/ Ambikā/ Jagaddhātṛī as the supreme presiding deity. Alongside the temples of the Devī, she also commissioned the building of temples to Śiva and Viṣṇu. The temples to Devī/ Śakti, compared to all other deities, attained more prominence during her reign. Along with her husband, she also commissioned the rebuilding and reorganization of numerous temples of the earlier periods like the Parihareśvara Devālaya at Dubi in the Bajali district of western Assam, Hātimurā Durgā Devālaya at Nagaon in central Assam, Kalyāṇī Devālaya at Gahpur in the Sonitpur district etc. Phuleśvari Kunvarī immensely revered Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya and was influenced by the codes and models of ritual worship of Durgā and other deities introduced by him. She, along with her husband Śiva Simha encouraged the codes of Hindu ritual worship propagated by Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya and caused them to be followed in every temple patronized by them across Assam. Kṛṣṇarām composed a treatise or manual of Durgā worship known as *Durgārcana Mañjarī* (Bhattacharya, B.C., 2010, 348) and introduced it through the support of Śiva Simha and Phuleśvarī Kunvarī in every Śakti temple. The ceremony of Durgā Pūjā in the Āhom royal house began to be celebrated strictly adhering to the models and procedures introduced by Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya. Till, to the present day, the worship of Sakti as Durga in many temples across Assam is being carried out following the *Durgārcana Mañjarī* and several other texts introduced by Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya.

It is said that Phuleśvarī Kunvarī caused all the earlier icons or Vighraha-s that were being worshipped in certain temples to be displaced or thrown into water bodies and replace them with new Vighraha-s and completely new models of worship (Bhuyan, 2012, 41). Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya, as said earlier brought into Assam a Smārta

system that was introduced by Raghunandana in Bengal in around 16<sup>th</sup> century CE. The profound influence and acceptance of the Raghunandana Smārṭa system, under the encouragement and support of Śiva Siṃha and mainly Phuleśvarī Kunvarī, according to Prof. Ranjit Kumar Deva Goswami, brought several segregations within the Assamese Hindu society. Its immensely dogmatic nature brought in serious discriminative behaviour and segregation on basis of caste, tribe, community and sect within the Hindu society, mainly in eastern Assam which was under the Āhom kingdom. Further, according to him, it turned the tradition of Saktism and the worship of Śakti as Durgā to a more elite practice and faith. The Śaktism that has been practiced in Assam since the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, under the influence of the Smārṭa system of Raghunandana transformed to something that was a symbol, preference and privilege only of the royalty and the elites. *Bauddha* or Vajrayāna Tāntric Buddhist elements have been a defining characteristic of Śakti worship in Assam as well as eastern India since the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, as pointed out in Chapter 1. The introduction of Raghunandana Smārṭa system might have diminished the Bauddha presence in the Śakti worship in Assam, mainly during the reign of Śiva Siṃha and Phuleśvarī Kunvarī, though there is no certainty about it.

Śaktism or Śakti worship became intimately associated with the Āhom royal court, nobility and elites, and with Āhom dominance and sovereignty during the rule of Śiva Siṃha and Phuleśvarī Kunvarī. Phuleśvarī Kunvarī is said to have stood up for making Śaktism the dominant faith of the Āhom state and becoming hostile and iron fisted towards anyone or any community who refused to pay obeisance or accept the supremacy of Śakti as Durgā/ Ambikā/ Gaurī. According to a popular lore prevalent in the areas in and around Sivasagar town, Phuleśvarī Kunvarī, also called '*Gaurī Rānī*' ordered beheading of anyone who does not bow down to goddess Durgā and acknowledge her supremacy over all other forms of worship within Hinduism<sup>6</sup>. One of the most infamous acts she did during her tenure as Bar Rajā and mentioned in the Burañjī-s was forcing the Moāmariyā Gosāins / Mahantas or seers/ leaders of the neo- Vaiṣṇava Kāla Saṃhati faction to bow down before the image of Durgā in a ceremony that was organized in the royal palace, and smearing their foreheads with the blood of the animals that were sacrificed to the goddess (Basu, 1970, 65). This insult inflicted upon the revered Mahantas by Phuleśvarī Kunvarī and the several other atrocities and injustices committed against them by the Āhom court has been

described in the historical accounts to be the cause of the devastating Moāmariyā rebellion in the succeeding periods. The Moāmariyā rebellion was responsible for the downfall of the Āhom kingdom. It ravaged the earlier glory and grandeur of the kingdom and the Āhom royalty had to seek the help of the British East India Company in crushing the revolt during the last phases of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE.

During the reign of Phuleśvarī Kunvarī, the practices and values of the original Āhom religion and also the Hindu systems of the Kāmṛūpiā tradition of Dharmasāstra-s lost their prominence under the influence of the codes and systems introduced by Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya who was designated as the Parbatīā Gosāin, the chief pontiff of the highest seat of Śakti and Tāntric worship- the Kāmākhyā temple at Nīlācala, as well as the royal priest and the chief spiritual adviser to the king, queen and the Āhom court. Apart from Śiva Simha and Phuleśvari Kunvarī, the other high nobles of the Āhom court and members of other aristocratic families in service of the court also came under the influence of the practices and ideals of Śaktism preached by Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya. He is said to have shrewdly manipulated the king and mainly Phuleśvarī Kunvarī in different Burañjīs and local lore. Though the era of reign of Śiva Simha along with Phuleśvarī Kunvarī is marked by Śākta- neo-Vaiṣṇava conflicts or more appropriately the conflicts between the Āhom royal court and the communities and clans of the Kāla Samhati taking a serious turn, and also the decreasing of the prominence and importance of the practices of the Āhom religion, several significant developments in the temple art and architecture of the Āhoms also took place during this time, which will be outlined in Chapter 3.

After the death of Phuleśvarī Kunvarī, Śiva Simha married her sister Draupadī and she became Ambikā Kunvarī or Mādambikā Devī. She is also known as *Parbatīā Kunvarī* (Bhuyan, 2012, 41) in the Burañjīs. She was also established as Bar Rajā and ruled the kingdom along with Śiva Simha in the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE. It was during her reign that Ādi Śankarāchārya's magnum opus and a very significant text of the Śrī Kula Śākta tradition- *Ānanda Laharī/ Saundarya Laharī* was translated to Assamese and its exquisite illustrated manuscript version was produced in the Āhom court. The art of miniature painting attained a high level of perfection under the patronage of the Āhom court presided by Śiva Simha and Ambikā Kunvarī. Several important Purāṇic and Tāntric texts focussing on the supremacy of Śakti

started to be translated and rendered to Assamese from the period of reign of the two rulers onwards. One of the tallest Śiva temples of the Indian subcontinent which represent the culmination of the finesse of the temple architecture developed under the patronage of the Āhoms- the Śiva Douḷ on the banks of the tank known as Sivasagar or Bar Pukhurī in midst of the Sivasagar town, was built under the patronage of Śiva Simha and queen Mādambikā. Adjacent to the Śiva Douḷ, are the Viṣṇu Douḷ and Devī Douḷ, both of them also commissioned by the same rulers. These two temples are of approximately the same height and much smaller than the Śiva Douḷ.

As said earlier, the high nobility and elites associated with the Āhom court under Śiva Simha and his queens also came under the influence of the Śaktism preached by Kṛṣṇarām Bhattāchārya and they too, commissioned building of several temples and digging of tanks across the kingdom. Harināth Barpātra Gohāin, a high minister, officer and a trusted lieutenant of king Śiva Simha commissioned the digging of a tank at Kalugaon, now in Sivasagar district and erecting of temples on its banks. Only two of these temples are in standing position now. Both of the temples are known as Barpātra Douḷ and the tank as Barpātra Pukhurī or Lakṣmī Sāgar Pukhurī. One of these temples is dedicated to Jagaddhātṛī, a form of Durgā and the other is dedicated either to Viṣṇu or Śiva. The temple to Jagaddhātṛī is now abandoned and no worship is carried out there. The other temple is still in use and Kṛṣṇa Janamāṣṭamī, Śivarātrī, and other ceremonies are annually celebrated there by the people of the surrounding village. Ankiyā Bhāonā plays on auspicious occasions are also enacted in the temple premises as per the accounts of the local residents residing in the vicinity of the temple. The cause of abandonment of the temple to Jagaddhātṛī is not known and the local residents of the area are also reluctant to say anything about it. Harināth Barpātra Gohāin was the younger brother of queen Phuleśvarī Kunvarī and the brother-in-law of king Siva Simha. After establishing Phulesvari Kunvarī as Bar Rajā, Śiva Simha also placed many of her relatives at important official positions in the Āhom court, Harināth being one of them.

After the period of reign of Śiva Simha and his queens, the succeeding rulers also took up Śaktism as their faith and also gave equal importance to Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism. The succeeding rulers were very much neutral regarding the preference and patronage of different sects and systems of Hinduism. They continued patronizing

the building of temples dedicated to the major deities of mainstream Hinduism. The practice of worshipping Durgā ceremonially continued in the Āhom royal household, and the kings themselves presided over as priests conducting the necessary rituals. Important Śākta texts like the Devī Māhātmyam of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa were rendered into Assamese by court poets like Rucinātha Kandalī.

#### Notes :

<sup>1</sup> Information provided to the author by Kabindra Prasad Sarma Doloi, Kamakhya, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Information provided to the author by Kabindra Prasad Sarma Doloi, Kamakhya, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Information provided to the author by Prantik Gupta, Guwahati, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Information provided to the author by Munmi Rajkumari, Tezpur, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Dhyāna form of Subacanī mentioned in the *Śabdakalpadruma* : four-headed, having a vermilion or reddish complexion, two-handed and one of the hands holding a Kamaṇḍalu or water pot. She is seated on a lotus and have a swan or Haṁsa as her mount/ vehicle. She is actually Suvacanī- the goddess of speech and is none other than Brahmāṇī Sarasvatī.

~ the above information provided by Prantik Gupta, Guwahati, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Information provided by the caretakers of the Bar Pukhurī Devī Dou, Sivasagar, 2018.

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