

Water Culture of the Ahoms:With Special Reference to the Sivasagar District

Abstract

Ahom kings occupy an important place in the history of Assam. During that time a vast development was occurred in every field of Assam. Various types of cultural activities were executed during the reign of different Ahom kings. Sivasagar was the capital of Ahom kingdom for a long time. Ahom dug more than 300 big and small ponds in the district of Sivasagar. The Indian Culture imposes importance to the relationship among human beings, trees and animals. The ancient kings planted trees beside the roads and the river banks for the Traveler and pedestrians. Tree plantation and digging of well is still believed to be pious work. The Ahom kings are considered unique in this regard. In this paper we have discussed about the purposes of constructing water tanks, the methods of constructing and the system of constructing etc.

Keywords: Ahom, Water Culture, Sivasagar, Tank

Introduction

A clan of the Tais, led by Sukapha entered Assam crossing the Patkai hills of the Ahoms before 13 century BC. There was not any existence of geographical structure named as Sivasagar when they entered Assam. The region was popularly known as Meteka which was re-named as Rangpur by the then Ahom king Swargadeu Rudra Singha. Later queen Ambika alias Madambika, the 2nd wife of Swargadeu Siva Singha dug a water tank in this place and named the tank as Sivasagar and the region as Sivapur to commemorate the memory of her husband Siva Singha. But histories are silent about the place Sivapur, as named by the queen. But there is no contradiction upon the fact that this was the queen who constructed the DouL and tank of Sivasagar. The British wrote Sivasagar as Sivapur and mentioned the name of the district as also Sivapur after the British conquer.¹ Later the place was known as Sivasagar following the name of DouL and water tank of Sivasagar, constructed by queen Ambika. Contrary to this, Dr. Maheswar Neog in his book Pavitra Axom mentioned that the name Sivasagar derived from the sacrifice made to the lord Siva. Notwithstanding the concept cannot be denied. The mentionable offices were constructed after establishment of British rule in the district. Probably the British named the place as Sivasagar as per the name of the water tank to make the name friendly among the people of the locality, which was popularly known as Sivapur at the time.

Aim of the Study

Since the 600 years of role by Ahom dynasty from 13th century to early 19th century people of Assam extremely influenced by Ahom culture. Man made ponds are one of the influential culture inherited by Ahoms. Still now there are so many families who reside besides a ancient pond near to them. More often we are denying the heritage of these ancient prides. These are not general ponds digged for merry water supplies. Tanks like Sivasagar Tank, Joysagar Tank, Rudrasagar Tank which have a diameter of 4 to 5 km have some unique engineering capabilities of that time. Our primary duty is to preserved those. We should aware about the prime motto of those creations. After that it is a considering matter of utilization. Aim of the study of this paper is very clear. We want to aware people regarding these issues. This paper is just an effort to unlock these issued. People will consider and will take necessary steps.

The Ahom

The Ahoms came into Assam in 13 century. During the time Assam was known as Kamrupa and Pragjyotishpur. The state was known as Assam after their arrival. The Ahoms ruled Assam from 1228 AD to 1826 AD. The Ahoms were the first ruler of Assam, who made the land and the people united.² A colourful Assamese culture was developed on the base of Bar Axom, led by Sukafa. Like late Sarbananda Rajkumar it may be mentioned that, The Ahoms had no evil attempt to force their own



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culture, civilization, language, religion, art, rites and rituals, conduct and usage, in lieu of destructing the culture, civilization, art, language, religion, customs and ethics, conduct and usages, flourished in the society of the state, which they conquered. Contrary to this they took language, religion and almost all customs and traditions, social conduct and behavior, culture etc. of the defeated race by knotting the tie of marital relationship with them and gradually became totally Assamese and created honey comb of Assamese culture and civilization. The conquered nation too set free the Ahoms to have their own language, religion, customs and traditions, culture, civilization for their livelihood.³ The contribution of the Ahoms towards making Assam is still very clear.

The Ahom Culture

The tenures of the Ahom kings occupy an important place in the history of Assam. During this time a vast development was occurred in every field of Assam. As far as the life-style as well as social pattern concerning the wide area of culture is concerned, the living-standard of the Ahoms was high and dignified. Literature, art, textile, festivals and functions, architecture and sculpture etc. were developed in the Ahom reign. The Ahom kings were fond of culture. They believed in the principles of assimilation. The Ahom culture successfully formed the basement of greater Assamese culture by covering customs-principles and traditions of the entire Assam. It was the greatness of the Ahoms that they set free to develop the relationship, created through the marriages with the people of the defeated land naturally. Late Sarbananda Rajkumar writes that, Swargadeu Sukapha captured the province of Soumar from the Barahis and Morans by defeating the Nagas of Patkai and of its lower regions. The Swargadeus, next to Sukapha, formed Ahom kingdom and administered the province by defeating Kacharis, Chutiyas, Baro Bhuyans, Koches, Mishmis etc. and conquering or subjugating by the policy of friendship time to time the Bhours, Ankas, Dafalas, Miris, Mishmis, Singfous, Khamtis, many clans of Nagas, Jayantias, Khasis, Mikirs, Lalungs, Garoes etc. hill tribe people. Besides, they made friendship with Naras, Burmese, Monipuris, Tripuris, Kamtapuris, Gaudas and Mughals etc. Getting in touch with these races and castes, the Ahoms included the entire Brahmaputra valley excluding the district of Goalpara to the Ahom dynasty. The Ahoms established a separate nation, separate language, separate culture and separate civilization by including all the race-religion and language united in the Ahom dynasty. The Ahoms belong to the Tai community. They are called 'Ahoms' in this land. Later the land was known as 'Axom' and the people 'Assamese' after their arrival.⁴

Various types of cultural activities were executed during the reign of different Ahom kings. The Ahoms patronized Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism and made Assam a secular state. It may be noted that, during the Ahom period there were not any dynasty throughout India, based on secularism. The mixed religious elements found in different architectures of Ahom dynasty clearly indicates the

secular characteristics of Ahom kingdom. We find many rare antique articles and sculptures being scattered in the district of Sivasagar which possess great historical and archeological value. "One of the great examples of the architectures of Rangpur town is the round stage, which is a symbol of modern Assam, and the biggest theatrical stage of ancient Asia. This oval shaped theatre is still dazzling, showing its old fame. We may find nowhere in Assam the great example of secular construction like Ranghar."⁵ It may be observed that, one of the important elements of Ahom Culture is the awareness of the Ahom kings on environment. There is a tradition of sacrifice to commemorate Saopha, Nangpha, Konwar, Amatya, Dangoriya, Martyrs, patriots and the victors by digging ponds. Besides, the big tanks were dug to use in different works like drinking water, watering paddy seedlings, religious activities of the royal families, washing of grams, washing of dead bodies of Saophas and Nangphas, cleaning of hoes, used in graveyards, washing of royal dresses, fish farming, washing of entrails, boat race etc."⁶ Separate ponds were dug for separate works for the convenience of the people. Moreover, trees were planted in the banks of the tanks, and in the campus of Douls and Devalayas for production of fruits, shades and beautification respectively. Construction of various gardens for beautification is one of the special features of Ahom era. Trees were also planted in the graveyards and tombs to commemorate the memories of the dead person. One may find science in the activities of Ahom tradition.

Water or Pond Culture of the Ahoms

Sivasagar is situated near hill and river. There is no sea near Sivasagar. Though sea is absent in the map of Sivasagar, the name 'Sivasagar' bears great significance. It may be noted that, there is no place in North-east India as well as Assam like Sivasagar which has a plenty of lakes and ponds. Sivasagar was the capital of the Ahom dynasty for long days. The Ahoms, in their 600 years of administration created a unique history by digging big ponds and constructing Douls beside the banks. The Ahoms dug more than 300 big and small ponds in the district of Sivasagar. Many constructions have been damaged due to flood and other natural calamities. Some big tanks were dried and became stony land in course of time.

The Indian culture imposes importance to the relationship among human beings, trees and animals. The ancient Indian kings planted trees beside the roads and river banks for the Travelers and pedestrians. Tree plantation and digging of well is still believed to be pious work. The Ahom kings are considered unique in this regard. The water tanks were constructed in Ahom kingdom due to different purposes; some of them are—

1. To commemorate the memories of kings, queens and princes.
2. To commemorate the memories of the ministers.
3. To commemorate the memories of patriots.
4. To commemorate the heroes who won victory in the wars.
5. To offer drinking water facility to the subjects.

6. To wash grams and other articles, used in the worships of the royal families.
7. To wash hoes and ploughs, used in cultivation.
8. To wash dead bodies of kings and queens.
9. To wash royal dresses.
10. For fish farming and gardening.

The Paik system was flourished in the Ahom reign. The head Paik was to execute various developmental jobs for the welfare of the people. As the head Paiks were engaged in the work of excavation of well, the works of digging big tanks became easier.

In that time many ponds were dug in different places of Assam. Though ponds were dug in the Pre-Ahom period but there are some differences comparing to the Ahom era. The Ahom kings took utmost care to choose pond site, to construct the banks of the tanks, to maintain clean water etc. The special characteristic of the royal tanks is that, the waters of these tanks never dried up and over flooded. The example of digging tanks through the traditional system like selection of sites by the *Deodhai Pundits* or *Cheng Mora*, scientifically examining the location of water source, by digging ponds and cleaning water by digging *Nagmari* post and watering on it are very rare in the Non-Ahom age. In this system of scientific construction of ponds, the source of water springs are found easily after a little bit of deep cannelling. In this method, the banks of ponds are to be upraised by digging ditch. For this reason, the water tanks of Joysagar, Gourisagar, Rudra sagar, Sivasagar are seen like water tubs, floating on the air.

As these tanks were constructed under the religious customary systems, i.e. by inviting priests and donating foods and cloths to them, these were named as 'Sagar'. It is also known that if the tank was sacrificed to one hundred or more numbers of priests, it was named 'Sagar' and if below, 'Pukhuri' was named for the water body. Besides some called pond as 'sagar' if it was covered an area of one *pura*.

The Ahom kings considered tank construction as a pious work. History tells us about the sacrifice of different articles, live human, and animals for the pond. A list of water tanks, constructed by the Ahom kings, has been given below—

1. Dihingia king, Chuhung Muhung (1497-1539)
2. Karotowa Pukhuri
3. Athabari Pukhuri
4. Gargayan king, Chuklen Mung (1539-1552)
5. Gargaon Pukhuri
6. Padum Pukhuri
7. Khora king, Chukhampha (1552-1603)
8. Nahar Pukhuri,
9. Jethi Pukhuri,
10. Mechlou Pukhuri,
11. Sondar Pukhuri
12. King Pratap Singha, Chuhenpha(1603-1648)
13. Mechagarh Pukhuri,
14. Rupahi Pukhuri,
15. Teliadonga Pukhuri,
16. Phulcheng Pukhuri,
17. Taokak Pukhuri,
18. Dergaon Pukhuri

19. King Jayaddhaj Singha, Chutamla (1648-1663)
 20. Rahdhala Pukhuri,
 21. Athaisagar Pukhuri,
 22. Tenga Pukhuri,
 23. Baduli Pukhuri,
 24. Neo Gohain Pukhuri,
 25. Lakhami Pukhuri
 26. King Chakraddhaj Singha, Chupung Mung (1663-1670)
 27. Burha Gohain Pukhuri,
 28. King Gadadhar Singha, Chupatpha (1681-1896)
 29. Bhogdai Pukhuri,
 30. Rahdai Pukhuri,
 31. Bauli Pukhuri,
 32. Mitha pukhuri,
 33. Borkala's Pukhuri,
 34. Joha Pukhuri,
 35. Thaora Pukhuri,
 36. Sukan Pukhuri (Batbari),
 37. Aghoni Pukhuri,
 38. Panibeel Pukhuri,
 39. Achubulia Pukhuri,
 40. Demow Pukhuri,
 41. Sukan Pukhuri (Demow)
 42. King Rudra Singha, Chuthrangpha (1696-1714)
 43. Jaisagar Pukhuri,
 44. Borkola Pukhuri,
 45. Sontola Pukhuri,
 46. Borpatra Pukhuri,
 47. Rongpur pukhuri,
 48. Chaara Pukhuri,
 49. King Siva Singha, Chutanpha (1714-1744)
 50. Dhai Pukhuri,
 51. Sibasagar,
 52. Gourisagar Pukhuri,
 53. Rajmao Pukhuri,
 54. Lakhimi Pukhuri (Kalugaon)
 55. King Rajeswar Singha, Churampha (1751-1769)
 56. Silpukhuri (Guwahati)
 57. King Lakshmi Singha, Chunyaopha (1769-1780)
 58. Bogidof's Pukhuri,
 59. Rudra Sagar Pukhuri,
 60. Gouri Ballabh Pukhuri,
 61. Ligiri Pukhuri King
 62. Gourinath Singha, Chuhitpongpha, (1780-1795)
 63. Aideu Pukhuri,
 64. Kunwari Pukhuri,
 65. Borborua Pukhuri King
 66. Kamaleswar Singha, Chuklingpha (1795-1811)
 67. Cheuni Pukhuri King Chandrakanta Singha, Chudingpha (1811-1821)
 68. Bishnusagar Pukhuri,
 69. Bangal Pukhuri,
 70. Burhagohain Pukhuri
- Some other large tanks constructed during the Ahom rules, the time of construction of which could not ascertained:
71. Nitai Pukhuri,
 72. Dhital Pukhuri,
 73. Sadhowa Pukhuri,
 74. Petudhowa Pukhuri,
 75. Kordhowa Pukhuri,
 76. Lengibar Pukhuri,
 77. Sonari Pukhuri,

65. Bamun Pukhuri,
66. Senduri Pukhuri,
67. Gabharu Pukhuri,
68. Khemdoi Pukhuri,
69. Solal's Pukhuri,
70. Numali Pukhuri,
71. Senchowa Pukhuri,
72. Bejor Pukhuri,
73. Sukan Pukhuri,
74. Phulpanichiga Pukhuri,
75. Rangachila Pukhuri,
76. Monkhamor Pukhuri,
77. Lepetkata Pukhuri,
78. Bejdoloi Pukhuri

According to the history of Charung Phukan following are some of big tanks

1. Jaisagar Pukhuri : Total square area : 240 bighas 6 kathas and 10 lochas
2. Gourisagar Pukhuri : Total square area : 221 bighas 3 kathas and 8 lochas
3. Sibsagar Pukhuri : Total area : 194 puras.
4. Meshagarh Pukhuri: Total area : 27 puras
5. Rajmao Pukhuri : Total area : 19 puras
6. Rohdai Pukhuri : Total area : 18 puras

Conclusion

The Ahom Kings executed various welfare activities. The samples of their great works are still remaining throughout Assam. As Sivasagar or Rangpur was the capital of the Ahom dynasty for many years, maximum numbers of constructions were seen in this region. And probably for their reason we find a large number of tanks in Sivasagar district. It is a matter of great concern that due to lack of maintenance and negligence a large number of wealth have been damaged. The tanks too are not exception. The big tanks are remaining without care and importance. The ponds of the remote areas have been lost their existence.

Besides, these ancient tanks lost their importance due to modern system of community water supply. It is also seen that the water of these ponds are being used in commercial purpose than that of domestic purpose. If we look through the life style of our forefathers, we can find the importance of pond in their life. It cannot be denied that the construction of big tanks to offer drinking water facility to the people was not a easy task. The people were to do hard work to fulfill their need of drinking water. The tanks, constructed by the Ahom kings played a vital role for the welfare of the society.

If may be thought that, there might not be any reason to construct big tanks only for the need of water. Probably, it might be the policy of the Ahom rulers to gain popularity among the people or their religious belief. Anyway, whatever might be the reason; it is sure that the people were benefitted by the activity.

It is easy to construct a pond using modern equipments and techniques. But it was amazing to note that, the Ahom kings did their great work without any modern tools for the welfare of the society and for this they should be thanked. It is our sincere duty to preserve this valuable wealth, which are being perished due to lack of care.

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Foot Notes

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