

Observations on Secularism in Assam

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Abstract

The secular heritage of Assam is longstanding and contrasts sharply with secular frameworks common in other parts of India. It is characterized by adaptable caste norms, the non-existence of untouchability as a formal social structure, and a persistent tradition of religious coexistence. These qualities have been shaped by Assam's geographic position, multi-ethnic society, and a history of tolerant rule under past kingdoms, strengthened further by the practical and inclusive philosophies of religious leaders and social reformers. This study identifies the fundamental elements that differentiate Assam's secular model, investigates the geographical, demographic, and political bases of its secular outlook, and evaluates how saintly figures and reform movements cultivated a pragmatic, inclusive mindset. Using primary and secondary historical, literary, and religious texts within a qualitative, historical-analytical framework, the paper shows how the interaction of cultural, political, and spiritual factors created Assam's lasting secular identity from ancient times to the present.

Keywords: *Assam, secularism, coexistence*

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Introduction

Secularism in Assam is not a recent phenomenon, yet its expression differs markedly from secular models found in other parts of India. The region's secular character is marked by relatively fluid caste boundaries, a historical lack of untouchability as a social institution, and a longstanding reverence for religious pluralism. Such features arise from the cultural temperament and inclusive worldview of Assam's inhabitants. This broad-minded social fabric has been molded by several forces: the state's geographic location, its composite ethnic makeup, the liberal governance of past dynasties, and the influence of saints and reformers who advocated spiritually grounded yet practical philosophies. A thorough grasp of Assam's secularism therefore demands an analysis of its social organization alongside its political and moral heritage, both past and present.

Objectives: The main objectives of the paper are given below:

- (i) To define the core attributes that distinguish Assam's secular tradition from other Indian regions, with specific emphasis on adaptable caste practices, the lack of untouchability as a codified institution, and enduring respect for religious diversity.
- (ii) To explore the geographic, demographic, and political foundations of Assam's secular ethos, including the state's location, its multi-ethnic population, and the administrative traditions of historical dynasties.
- (iii) To assess the role of spiritual leaders and reform movements in shaping Assam's secular values, highlighting how their teachings fostered an inclusive and pragmatic worldview from early history to the present.

Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative, historical framework to address its objectives. It analyzes primary and secondary texts to compare Assam's caste structure, patterns of untouchability, and traditions of religious coexistence with those in other parts of India, while assessing how the administrative decisions of earlier dynasties influenced secular practices. The research also evaluates the writings and philosophies of Assamese saints such as Srimanta Sankardeva to highlight principles of inclusivity and tolerance. Historical, literary, and religious material is then brought together to demonstrate how geographical setting, population diversity, political governance, and spiritual thought collectively shaped Assam's secular heritage. The work is based entirely on published books, academic articles, and documented historical sources.

Discussion and findings

It is widely argued that Assam's cultural identity represents a distinctive strand within the broader tapestry of Indian culture. Fundamentally composite in character, it traces part of its ancestry to "Caucasoid Aryan"¹ traditions, yet it is not limited to that heritage. Assamese culture reveals a strong imprint of the diverse

ideas, beliefs, and social practices of neighboring Mongoloid communities from both the hills and the plains. Consequently, Assam embodies a natural synthesis where Aryan and Mongoloid cultural elements have blended over time. Within the Indian union, the state thus serves as a prominent instance of organic cultural fusion and mutual assimilation. A secular orientation has been a persistent force throughout the historical evolution of Assamese culture, as discussed below.

Secularism in Ancient Period (600 B. C. – 10, 000 A. D.)

References to ancient Assam appear throughout the great Epics, the Puranas, and the Tantras. The *Mahabharata* identifies the region as “Pragjyotishpura,” whereas the Puranas and Tantras name it “Kamarupa.” Culturally, ancient Assamese society had reached a remarkably sophisticated level. In the words of Sir Edward Gait, “...in the distant past the inhabitants of the country which we now call Assam attained considerable power and a fair degree of civilization; and this view is confirmed by the narrative of the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang and by the copper plate inscriptions.”² At that time, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the traditional belief systems of Mongoloid tribes existed side by side. Hiuen Tsiang, who traveled to the region in 643 A.D., documented that the inhabitants of ancient Kamarupa extended equal respect to all religious traditions then present.

Secularism in Ahom Period (1200 A.D. – 1824 A.D.)

The Ahom era is regarded as one of the most illustrious phases in Assam’s history. Under royal patronage, a significant cultural convergence occurred between Aryan groups and indigenous tribes. The Ahom period fostered an environment in which a secular outlook could develop and flourish. “Originally migrating from Southeast Asia, the Ahoms gradually severed ties with their homeland and embraced the Hindu traditions of the Aryans.”³ At the same time, they demonstrated notable tolerance toward other faiths practiced in the region and, through inclusive governance, earned the goodwill of the Brahmaputra Valley’s inhabitants. It is noteworthy that between 1206 CE and the end of Ahom rule, Muslim rulers from the northwest launched seventeen invasions of Assam. After repelling these incursions, Ahom monarchs permitted Muslim prisoners of war to settle in the valley alongside caste Hindus and tribal communities. Over time, these Muslims voluntarily integrated into Assamese society. As contemporary accounts record, the descendants of those who married locally “act exactly in the manner of the Assamese, and have nothing of Islam except the name; their hearts are inclined far more towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with Muslims.”⁴ The religious climate of the period was marked by non-interference and tolerance. As a rule, Ahom rulers not only permitted sects other than their own but also extended equal patronage to diverse beliefs. Although

they adopted Hinduism and its customs, the kings did not fully discard their ancestral practices. It is worth noting that during the reigns of Gadadhar Singha (1681–1696) and Rudra Singha (1696–1714), extensive socio-cultural exchanges took place between Assam and the neighboring Mughal Empire, which indirectly advanced secular trends. Royal princes and queens received instruction in classical music from Muslim maestros, with Formud Ali being a notable example. The celebrated manuscript *Hastividya*, authored by Sukumar Barkath, contains vivid illustrations by the artist Dilwar. When Emperor Aurangzeb mounted an offensive against Assam, **Bagh Hazarika**, a Muslim general in Ahom service, fought against the Mughal forces. Such instances reflect the longstanding unity of Hindus and Muslims along the Brahmaputra.

Secularism in Vaisnavite Period (1449 – 1569)

If we look back and examine Assam's historical record, it becomes clear that the secular dimension of its culture was significantly revitalized in the late fifteenth century through the influence of Sankaradeva (1449–1568), Assam's renowned spiritual leader and polymath. He founded and disseminated *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma*, commonly referred to as 'Bhagavati Dharma'.⁵ Although the Ahom monarchy had already incorporated tolerance and coexistence into its administrative framework, Sankaradeva advanced these principles further by grounding equality in spiritual thought. *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma* was inclusive and progressive in nature. It is important to note here that Sankaradeva held that morality extended beyond statutes or customary norms; it purified the practitioner's consciousness and instilled a sense of individual responsibility. He opposed deterministic interpretations of Karma, maintaining that the doctrine upheld human agency. According to him, 'Sadharana Dharmas' or cardinal virtues were to be cultivated by all persons, irrespective of caste, to the fullest extent of their capacity. In addition to emphasizing compassion, love, and forgiveness, he championed social service as a moral duty. He banned violent sacrificial practices and sought to eliminate prejudices based on caste, creed, or rank. It can be said that, five hundred years before Mahatma Gandhi, Sankaradeva stood among the earliest Indian philosophers to condemn untouchability. His *Eka Sarana Dharma* was open to the most disadvantaged, and he asserted that a *Brahmin* and a *Chandala* were not different, because God viewed all beings as equal. Thus, the faith he propagated was democratic in ethos and application, and its outlook was wholly universal. By removing caste distinctions and advocating universal brotherhood, he brought Muslims and tribal communities into his fold as disciples. Mahatma Gandhi noted, "Assam, indeed, is fortunate, for Sankaradeva has, five centuries ago, given to the Assamese people an ideal which is also my ideal of Ramayana."⁶ Professor Humayun Kabir stated that Sankaradeva's "message of the essential unity of man in

spite of differences in beliefs, customs, institutions and traditions has a special value in the modern world.”⁷ The core ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, later upheld by figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Mao-Tse-Tung, were both preached and practiced by Sankaradeva five centuries earlier. He manifested these values in his conduct and in his doctrine. Hence, Sankaradeva’s contribution to the development of secularism in Assam remains unmatched.

Furthermore, Assam maintained its status as a sovereign kingdom until 1824. That year, British colonial authorities annexed Assam and incorporated it into India for the first time. In the course of the anti-colonial struggle, numerous Muslims from Assam laid down their lives alongside Assamese Hindus. Bahadur Gaonburah⁸, one such martyr, embodied the enduring unity between Hindus and Muslims.

Secularism in Modern Assam

From a historical standpoint, Assam’s Muslim population is predominantly made up of the descendants of war captives who settled in the Assam valley during Ahom governance, along with people who converted to Islam in that period. These Muslims are an indivisible component of the larger Assamese community. Culturally, Assamese Hindus and Muslims are bound by an extraordinarily profound sense of unity. In *Rethinking Sankaradeva’s Philosophy in 21st Century*, Nilima Sharma writes, “the germ of the secular spirit already planted by the ancient kings, nourished by the Ahoms, rejuvenated by Sankaradeva, Ajan Fakir, Tag Bahadur and their followers, has a very strong root in the cultural soil of Assam.”⁹ At present, it is clear that *zikirs* - the devotional compositions of Assamese Muslims - bear a close resemblance to Hindu Vaishnava verses. Both forms correspond in diction, compositional style, and devotional subject matter. Islamic *zikirs* routinely draw on Indian philosophical notions like ‘Brahma’, ‘Atman’, and ‘Jiva’. Similarly, Sankaradeva’s literary corpus includes many Urdu and Persian expressions. Hajo serves as another lasting emblem of interreligious concord. Situated twelve miles from Guwahati, this small town contains the **Poa Mecca** sacred to Muslims, the **Hayagriva Madhava temple** revered by Hindus, and a Buddhist prayer hall, all situated near one another. Even today, in the 21st century, Muslims of Hajo join the lively Holi parades held by Hindus.

Conclusion

This discussion makes it evident that Assam’s historical experience reveals a secular character that was neither imported nor left to chance. It developed organically from the land—formed by the state’s terrain, the close coexistence of varied communities, the liberal policies of former rulers, and the teachings of saints who upheld compassion as a daily practice. While secular principles elsewhere in India often emerged as a political solution to diversity, in Assam they grew gently

from ordinary life, where caste distinctions remained fluid, untouchability never became an entrenched custom, and regard for other faiths was simply normal. Ancient works such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*, together with Hiuen Tsiang's account from the seventh century, describe a society that extended equal esteem to Hindu, Buddhist, and tribal traditions. The Ahoms wove that attitude into administration. They received settlers, offered prisoners of war a place to live, patronized every religion, and fostered a kingdom in which Muslims, Hindus, and tribal groups labored and lived in harmony. Through the Vaishnavite movement, Sankaradeva gave this spirit a profound expression. He placed equality and service at the center of devotion, rejected caste prejudice, and brought those long kept outside—including Muslims—into his spiritual fold well before such views became common worldwide. That legacy still moves through Assam's cultural life today. It can be heard in *zikirs* that resonate with Vaishnava hymns, seen in Hajo where **Poa Mecca**, the **Hayagriva Madhava temple**, and a Buddhist prayer hall stand close together, and felt when Muslims join Hindus in **Holi** processions. The sacrifices made by martyrs like Bahadur Gaonburah during the independence struggle show that Hindu-Muslim solidarity here is not rhetoric, but memory and practice. Therefore, secularism in Assam rests less on legal boundaries between religion and state and more on a quiet, lived habit of mutual accommodation. Looser social structures, the lack of untouchability as an institution, and genuine interfaith friendship all spring from the same roots: the interplay of geography, peoples, tolerant governance, and the humane teachings of leaders from Sankaradeva to Ajan Fakir. Keeping this heritage in mind helps us respect Assam's history and sustain its plural present. In this way, the secular spirit stays firmly grounded in Assam's soil—a calm, ongoing testament to how communities can flourish together while remaining themselves.

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