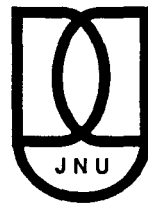


**MUNDUNSUNGKHAM: THE CASKET OF GOLD;
ASPECTS OF THE ECONOMY, SOCIETY AND CULTURE
UNDER THE AHOM RULE Circa 13TH – 18TH**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the
award of the degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

LIZA TALUKDAR



**Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi**

2004

*Dedicated to the memory of
my beloved grandparents.*

Aaita & Baba



July 21, 2004

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled “**Mundun Sungkham: The Casket of Gold; Aspects of the Economy, Society and Culture under the Ahom rule Circa 13th – 18th**”, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this university or any other University and is my original work.

LIZA TALUKDAR

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before examiners for evaluation.

PROF. MRIDULA MUKHERJEE
(Chairperson)
Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067

PROF. RAJAT DATTA
(Supervisor)
Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067

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ABBREVIATION

AAH	An Account of Assam by Francis Hamiltaon.
AB	Ahom Buranji, (tr. & ed.) G.C. Barua.
ABHB	Asam Buranji by Harakanta Sarma Barua Sadaramin.
ABGB	Asam Buranji by Gunabhram Barua.
ABS	Asam Buranji Sar, (ed.) P.c. Choundury.
ABSM	Asam Buranji obtained from the family of Sukumar Mahanta, (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan.
ADB	Ahomar Din by Hiteswar Barbarua
CHAB	A Comprehensive History of Assam by S.L. Barua.
DAB	Deodhai Asam Buranji, (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan.
DAR	A Descriptive Account of Assam by W. Robinson
DHAS	Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati.
DRV	Darrang Raj Vamsavali, (ed.) N.C. Sarma.
GCK	Guru Charit Katha (ed.) M. Neog.
MSMCD	Mahapurusha Sri Sankaradeva Aru Sri Madhavadeva Charita by Daityari Thakur.
HAG	A History of Assam by E.A. Gait.
KGC	Katha Guru Charit, (ed.) U.C. Lekharu.
MEAG	Medieval and Early Colonial Assam by A. Guha.
PAB	Purani Asam Buranji, (ed.) H.C. Goswami.
PSN	Prachya Sasanawali by M. Neog.
SAB	Satsari Asam Buranji, (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan.
TB	Tungkhungia Buranji, (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan.
TB (Eng.)	English Version of the Tungkhungia Buranji (ed. & tr.) S.K. Bhuyan.

GLOSSARY

Abadi, Cultivable land.

Adhikar, the head of Vaisnava Satra.

Agrahara, revenue free land granted to Brahmanas.

Agaru, a kind of tree from which a kind of perfume is prepared.

Ahu, a kind of paddy sown broad- cast in winter and harvested in summer.

Ali, road/embankment

Ankya Nat, an Assamese drama composed on the model of those of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, Characterised by the use of ankas or painted scenes.

Ashar, Ahar, the 3rd month of the Hindu Calendar, June 16-July 15.

Asrama, a hermitage.

Bahatiyas, peasants- paiks residing in the foothill areas of Assam who were allotted to hill tribes by the Assam rulers for rendering service or a pay a stipulated tribute in kind called posa to their hill masters.

Bailung, an Ahom priest chiefly engaged in astrological calculations.

Bairagi, an itinerant recluse, belonging to a religions sect without any fixed dwelling.

Barangani, Subscription; a tax levied on the satras.

Bhakat, a Vaishanava bachelor devotee of a Satra

Bargit, a raga based devotional song composed by Sankardeva and Madhabdeva.

Barimarit, homestead, land for house and garden.

Bar-rajā, a title applied successively to the three queens of Siva-Simha, Phulesvari, Ambika, Sarvesvari. They exercised sovereign powers when the king was disabled on astrological forecast.

Bayan, Instrumentalist.

Buranji, Chronicles written in Assamese or Tai

Caklang, marriage according to Ahom rites.

Candi, Goddess Durga in the form assumed for destruction of demons.

Cowri, a shell used as coin in early and medieval Assam.

Chadar, a piece of cloth used as upper garment by the Assamese.

Charduar, Chariduar, four duars or an mountain pass on Durrang frontier.

Carit Puthi, biography of medieval Vaishanva Saints of Assam.

Chouky, an outpost, a customs house.

Churiya, a waist cloth of man, also called dhuti.

Daksina, a sacrificial fee.

Dangaria, title reserved for the three Cabinet ministers, the Bargohain the Burhagohain and Barpatra Gohain in the Ahom age.

Dasa, salve.

Devottar, revenue free lands gifted for erection and maintenance of temples.

Dewal, the second man of a got of paiks.

Deka-Gossain, usually Deva-Adhikar, the Gossains nominated to succeed the Adhikar of a Satra.

Deodhai, an Ahom priest offering worships to the Ahom deities, according to strict orthodox fashion.

Deodhani, Shamanistic female dancers, a dance form.

Dola, Assamese litter, sadan or palanquin.

Duar, a mountain pass.

Duar, a mountain pass.

Ga-dhan, poll-tax, commutation money in lieu of personal service.

Ga-mati, two puras of arable land allotted to each paik.

Ganak, literally a calculator.

Ghat, landing place on the bank of a river, a tax for using such a place for trade.

Gomasta, a leader or a chief of a department under the koches.

Guru, a preceptor.

Garh, embankment

Goyan, a leader of participant in reciting or singing hymns or devotional songs accompanied by music.

Gohain, a title applied to three Dangarias.

Hat-market place, a periodical market.

Gossain, a generic term applied to revered persons or objects, a spiritual head.

Got, a unit of 4 or 3 paiks.

Gur, molasses.

Guru, a preceptor

Guru-kar, tolls realized for a guru.

Hadis, scavengers.

Hati, rows of hut.

Hengdan, a straight sword, used by Shans, and later by the Ahoms.

Hatkhowa, a lessee or collector of taxes in a hat or market.

Japi, a broad, circular bamboo-made cover used as sun-shade or in rain.

Khat, an estate of the nobles in medieval Assam.

Khar, sulphur.

Khel, an association or guild of Assamese subjects rendering specific services to the state, under a hierarchy of officers, Phukans, Barua, Rajkhowa.

Kheldar, head of a khel.

Likchou, a paik assigned to the noble for their private use.

Lengdon, Lord of Heaven, the progenitor of Tai Ahom.

Ligira, a male attendant in the household of the King, prince or noble.

Mon, unit of measurement of weight, usually of 40 scrs or 37kgs.

Mati-mah, a kind of whole black which is unshelled.

Mug, another kind of pulse.

Mul, the first man of a got of paiks.

Medam-Me-Phi, oblation offered to dead ones and the gods, a religious ceremony denoting ancestor worship.

Mel, an estate including lands and paiks and administrated by government officers for the upkeep of the kings wives, children and other near relations.

Meldagias, Melkhowa, men consisting a part of the paik, allotment of various mels or estates.

Morans, a pre-Ahom original tribe in Assam.

Mul, the first man out of every got.

Narayana rupa, silver coin of Cooch Behar.

Nat, actor, dancer.

Nati, actress, danseuse.

Nankar, rent-free lands granted to person other than the Brahmins.

Pamua, temporary cultivators.

Pura, unit of measurement of lands, rices, pulses etc.

Pha or Phra, gods.

Phoid, an Ahom family.

Rikkhwan, a religious function calling for longevity of life.

Satra, an Assamese Vaisnava monastery.

Satriya Barua, a Barua in a Satra.

Smrti, code of Hindu law.

Swargadeo, literally means God of Heaven, the Chaopha, title of Ahom rulers.

Ser, a unit of weight about 930gms or 1/40 of a mon.

Tewal, the third man of a got.

Tol, traditional school.

Tola, a measurement equal to 1/80th part of a ser.

Vamsavali, genealogical work of Vaishnava Saints or Koch Kings.

Zikir, devotional song of Assamese Muslims.

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

“Assam is in many ways a country of exceptional interest”¹. Situated in the extreme north –east frontier of India between 28° and 24° North latitudes and 89°86' and 96° East longitudes, Assam has a rich legacy of history.

Assam in the earliest of times was known as Pragjyotisha. This name has been mentioned in the two great epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata mentions Assam as the land of the Mlecc has and Ashuras, i.e. a non-Aryan country. According it, the kingdom of Pragjyotisha extended in the west up to the river karotoya and in the South to the Bay of Bengal. The river karotoya was regarded as sacred as the Ganges in those days. The “Puranas” and the “Tantras” refer to Assam as Kamrup. While according to ‘Kalika – Purana” the temple Kamakhya was in the centre of Kamrup, the ‘Vishnu-Purava’ gives four hundred fifty miles as the extent of kamrup in four directions from the temple. According to Yogini- Kantra, the kingdom comprised of the whole of Brahmaputra valley, together with Coch Bihar, Rangpur Apart from it, Assam also comprised of modern day political states of Manipur, Jaintia, Cachar, Western Assam and parts of Mymensing and Sylhet. Thus, the ancient Kamrupa, occupied an area larger than that of the mordern Assam state and extended westwards t the river Kaotoya.

The present state of Assam comprises of two valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Barak. The Brahamaputra valley which, we are concerned with in this paper extended at the beginning of the colonial period

¹ Gait- A History of Assam, Introduction.

from the river Manah on the north bank of Branhmaputra to the foot of the Himalayas close upon the frontier of China. On the north it is bounded by the hills occupied by the Bhutias, the Akas, the Duflas, the Abhos and the Singhpos. On the South –East are the states of Cachar and Manipur. To, the South, the Jayantias, Khasis and the westward in succession the Garos.

The origin of the name 'Axom' (Asom or Assam) is not fully clear. Baharistan – I-Ghayabi written by Mirza Nathan depicting the geo-political conditions of eastern India during the period of 1608 – 1624, referred to the Ahom territory as the "Kingdom of Asam". Banikanta Kakati points out that Suryakhari Daivajna, who compiled the *Darrang Rajvanshowali* in the sixteenth century, referred to the Ahom community (and not the land that they held) as Axom², Sankardeva in one of his verses composed in the early sixteenth century, while refereeing to the castes and communities of then Assam, used the term Axom to mean the Ahom. Sihabuddin Talish, who accompanied Mirzumla as a scribe in the latters invansion to Ahom³ kingdom in 1662-63, referred to the land east of Guwahati upto Sadiya as Asom. Incidentally that exactly was the territories then held by the Ahom King.

Scope and Objective of the Work

The scope of the work is confined to the study of various aspects of the economy society and culture of the Ahom kingdom from the first half of 13th century to the first quarter of the 19th century, when Assam was taken over by the British after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826A.D. It was, therefore a period

² Kakati, B.K.- 'Asamiya Bhasar Gathan Aru Bikash' pp. 1-6.

³ Dutta, H.N (ed) – Shrimadihalwat, Skandha – 2, p. 38.

of about six hundred years, when the Ahoms were ruling over the state. The territorial unit which was then known by the name "Assam" covered almost the entire Brahmaputra valley excluding Goalpara, which was then known by the name "Assam" covered almost the entire Brahmaputra valley excluding Goalpara, which was never a part of the state of Assam in medieval times. The period is important in the history of Assam in the sense, that it was during this period that the state of Assam was formed and its societies were shaped, which subsequently came to be recognized as Assam and Assamese society respectively.

One of the problems faced by this medieval Assamese society, was the relative economic retardness, inspite of possessing a vast store of natural and material resources. This dissertation will concentrate on the reasons for this economic retardness. The central aim of this dissertation will be to trace the interactions between the society and economy and the cultural patterns of Assam under Ahom rule. One major dimension of the social organisation and the conflicts within it led to the Vaishnava movement in the 16th Century. The Vaishnava movement and its Satra organizations, brought into its fold large section of society, who were in some way dissatisfied with the Ahom state. This conflict finally took the form of an anti-state movement. This dissertation will therefore be greatly concerned with the factors and forces of this relative economic retardness, and will try to trace these factors within the Ahom system of administration.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Many works dealing with these aspects have been done but no systematic and serious study covering all the aspects undertaken in this work has been undertaken. All the initial major writings on Ahom history has been a political history writing. This is basically because the "buranjis" which are an authentic source for the period are a political narrative with only stray references to the economic – socio-cultural history of the period. There are however an invaluable contribution to the study of the history of the region in the writings of people like Edward Gait (A History of Assam), U.N. Gohain (Assam under the Ahoms), P.N. Gohain Barua (Ahom Din). Their works did bring into light many unexplored and unknown source materials. However, their narratives were of traditional pattern; neither interpretative nor objective and analytical. Sir Edward Gait's book A History of Assam (1905) was the first attempt to write a comprehensive history of the region.

Sir Edward Gait's history is the political history of the period in a concised form. The Ahom history section which he has written is based on the Buraji literature, and as stated the Buranjis are basically a political narrative Gait's history therefore basically deals with the diplomatic relations of the Ahom Rajas with the neighbouring kingdom viz- the Kacharis, Jayantias. His history is mainly concerned with the expansion policy of the Ahoms. Gait revised his second edition and included some of the Persian translated accounts like the Baharistan-I-Ghaibi and Tarikh-I-Ibriyah. This, makes his description of the Muhammadan way more authentic. There are however many lapses in Gait's work. His confinement of his work on the Buranjis and

non consideration of other sources such as the travel record of the English administrators and travelers, the Vaisnava literature etc have made his work very narrow lacking in dynamism. Sir E.A. Gaits book however remains a pioneer in writing of comprehensive in history of the period and paved the way for other researchers to take off from where he left.

Another book which have paved the way for future researchers in medieval Assam history in U.N. Gohainis "Assam under the Ahoms" published 1942. In his book U.N. Gohain has touched upon the social and economic history of the period apart from the political history.

Though Gohains work also primarily concentrates on the political part of the Ahoms, he has included chapters on the general condition of the people under the Ahom rule, the relation of Ahom with the hill tribes, and commercial regulation. True, these chapter are very general and are of very descriptive character, it never the less gives a welcome change to the trend of political history writing of the period.

Another loophole in Gohains writing is his use of limited sources. He has based his book primarily on the accounts of Dr. Wade, David Scoott, B.C. Allen and Sir Edward gait. His consultation of the Buranjis and other relevant sources reflects in his work. His work is another case where he gives a mere descriptive account of the period without any analytical and critical review.

Dr. H.K. Barpjari comes as a fresh wave of air in this tradition of history writing Assamese history. He edited five volumes of Assam History. The

three volume of his series "The Comprehensive History of Assam" deals with the medieval period. Barpujari is a pioneer in writing modern Assamese history and his work is a breakaway from the earlier traditional pattern of history writing. Barpujaris writing covers many unexplored fields of the Assam history. He makes use of the vast resource of the Vaishnava literature, which reflects the rich socio-cultural as well as the economic history of the period . The use of the *carit puthis* has added a new dimension to the treatment of certain topics, one such being the question of trade. The *carit puthis* consists of example and references to traders (the *mudois*) who engaged in both internal and external trade. Barpujari has also taken references from the *bruanjis* of instances of promotion of trade by the Ahom Swargodoes and the different market regulations taken up by them. This new approach, is a breakaway from the traditional interpretation of self –sufficiency with no extra or surplus production needed for trade.

Barpujari thus gives the scope for future researchers to take up the subject in more details, and also gives the imagination of researchers to take up more aspects of this topic like the Ahom–Tribal trade links, the fairs promoted for exchange of goods by the Ahom Rajas, which Barpujari had not taken up. Barpujari thus paves the way for the analytical interpretation of history and encourages to look beyond established norms to traditional historiography.

Dr. Lakshmi Devi's book "Ahom – Tribal Relations" (a political study) 1968, is another important book which covers a very important subject the relations of the Ahoms with the neighbouring tribes both hills and plains. The

book is a political study of the relations between the Ahoms and the tribes viz. The Nagas, Morans, Borahis, Jayantias. She primarily uses the Buranjis as her sources. Here book is interesting for one respect which is the highlighting of the economic considerations behind the diplomatic relations). To cite an instance- the economic considerations were largely responsible for the hostility with the Nagas of the Tirap Frontier Division of NEFA, who lived on the low hills close to the plains of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts. This region had its economic importance for the Ahoms as it possessed several salt wells. The Ahoms obtained exclusive possession of some of these salt wells and also the right to certain other wells by fighting with Nagas.

Lakshmi Devi in her book thus opens up the scope of certain new dimension to the whole question of the economic relations of the Ahoms, of which the economic transactions with the tribals form a very important part of the Ahom economic history.

A break in the tradition of interpretation came with Amalendu Guha is book "Medieval and Early Colonial Assam"-Society, Polity Economy, 1991. Guha has given an economic interpretation to the Moamariya rebellion. He breaks new ground as he calls the situation arisen by the land grants of the rulers as "feudal". He divides the society into three categories of feudal lords. (i) the traditional Ahom nobility (ii) the spiritual lords, i.e. priests and abbots some of whom were non-brahmans (iii) the hereditary vassal chief. He goes into the depths of the problems faced by the paiks under this feudalisation. Further with the monetisation of the economy, these grievances were further aggravated, as the better off paiks could buy their freedom by paying a

commutation money. These grievances led these groups to join religious movement of the Moamaria uprising, which soon took a popular colour.

Guha's interpretation, hence provides a new dimension to many vital problems of the state, and gives further researchers new scope of research.

The dissertation will consist of three main chapters along with a conclusion.

The first chapter will focus on the trading activities of the period, under review. Available historiography has maintained the existence of very little trade in the region in the period⁴. They base their argument on the fact that, the Ahom rulers believed in a closed door policy and therefore did not interact with their neighbours.

Yet, there are references in the *Buranjis* and *Carit-puthis* of the existence of internal and external trade in the region. There are references in *Buranjis* of the Ahom rulers trying to establish a network of markets and trade routes. The *Buranjis* also highlight the activities of Assamese traders in Bengal and other neighbouring states. The *carit puthis* also show engagement of Vaishnava saints in trade. Therefore, the medieval Assamese society was not a "no-trade zone". Nevertheless, it could not emerge as a very strong candidate in the prosperous medieval Indian commercial nexus.

The second chapter finds out the traits of the medieval Assamese society. This society being largely tribal dominated, failed to evolve the rigid caste system as prevalent in other parts of India, in that period. Yet it was for

⁴ Scholars like E.A. Gait, U.N. Gohain consists of this group.

from being an egalitarian society. The Ahoms evolved a new system of social division known as the Paik' System. Under this all the adult male population from the age of sixteen to fifty had to render personal service to the state. Though the upper the Ahoms, wanted to bring under its submission the various tribes of the region, This system was not free from bias. Here too, the people of higher birth were exempted from rendering personal service. Others, i.e. Kanri Paik: were literally bound to the land of their masters. This gave no time and opportunity to this large chunk of population to engage in trade or other activities to improve their conditions. Besides the favour shown to people of high birth and caste (with the increase in brahmanical influence), infuriated these Paiks, who found out other ways to show their displeasure, one such being the taking refuge in the Sattras.

The third chapter will focus on this State-Sattra relation. Sattras which were the monasteries of the Vaishnava saints, initially received great patronage in forms of land grants and other help from the Ahom rulers and nobility. Thus, encouraged, they grew in number and power. They also became the refuge of many dissatisfied Paiks, who took initiation under a Guru. King Jaydhvaj Singha had exempted the celibate bhakats from rendering personal service to the state. This, soon became the trend, as thousands of paiks took initiation under a Sattra. The problem became very grim by the time Gadadhar Singha came into power. With him started the State- Sattra conflict, which culminated in the Moamariya uprisal in 1769.

In the conclusion we shall try to link these development in social and religious field with the lack of economic development in the region. This will

basically be to see how the Paik system hindered the growth of a strong commercial network. We will also see how the Sattras contributed to this problem of economic underdevelopment .

SOURCES

For primary sources we shall depend on the *Buranjis* and *carit puthis*. We shall take the help of translated Persian Chronicles, records and monographs of the British period besides a host of secondary sources in Assamese and English languages, details of which is given in the Bibliography.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE AHOMS

To get a proper understanding of the Ahom rule in Assam we should know about the background that led to the emerging of the Ahoms as the single largest power in the Brahmaputra valley.

The most significant role in Assam in the growth of its civilization, was played by the Ahoms, a section of the Tai (speaking group) of the Mongoloid race of south-east Asian regions, who originally dwelt in Mongolia and in the south-western part of China in the south of Yangtse-Kiang.⁵ In course of time, as a result of their conflicts with the Chinese people,⁶ some of them had migrated as far as Yunan and established there a number of principalities.⁷ During the sixth and the subsequent centuries they expanded over and

⁵ P. Gogoi, *The Tai and The Tai Kingdoms*, p. 32.

⁶ Gogoi, *op-cit*, p. 32ff.

⁷ Gogoi, *op-cit*, p. 103.

occupied the whole of the Sheuli valley down to the Irrawaddy in upper Burma and formed there a number of Tai states, such as, Hsen-wi, Mong-mit, Bhamo etc.⁸

According to P. Gogoi, it was from the Tai state of Mong-mit that the Ahoms under the leadership of Sukapha came to Assam.⁹ But there have been a number of contradictions as to the place from where Sukapha and his people came to Assam. S.K. Bhuyan on the basis of the Tai-Ahom and the Assamese chronicles states that it was Mao-Long within the kingdom of Mung-Maio, a Shan state in upper Burma¹⁰ from where Sukapha came. In Gait's history¹¹ also Sukapha's original home land is mentioned as Mao-Lung. In the Ahom chronicles it is variously mentioned as Mao-Lung, Mong-Mao, Mong-Mao-Lung etc.¹² According to J.N. Phukan these names stand for the same state and belong to the 'Big Mao' or 'Big Tai' branch of the Tais living in south-western Yunan and Upper Burma; but its proper boundary is difficult to define.¹³ On the basis of the similarity of the Tai scripts used by the Ahoms of Assam and the Tais of south-western Yunan (The Dehong Prefecture), he opines that the state was somewhere in Yunan. According to E.R. Leach, existence of this state of Mao-Lung or Mong-Mao may be placed somewhere between the Nam-Mao and Nam-Wan rivers some fifty miles to the east of Bhamo in Burma.¹⁴ It is, however, not feasible to locate the people within such limited boundaries. From the extent of the spread of the same people

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bhuyan Relations, p.2.

¹¹ HAG, p.77.

¹² AB, p.4.

¹³ Loc. cit, p.4.

¹⁴ The Comprehensive history of Assam, vol.II, p.51.

over a wide range of territories, we may conjecture that the Tais or the 'Shan proper' to which Sukapha and his people belonged, might have spread from western Yunan to upper Burma and it was from the nearest station that they came to the Brahmaputra valley.

There are two versions of the "Divine Origin" of the Ahoms kings, one being the story told by the Deodhais, which tallies very closely with that still preserved amongst the Shans of upper Burma, while the other's is a modification of it, invented by the Brahmans with a view to encouraging their conversion to Hinduisim. Both agree in attributing to them a divine ancestry.

According to the Deodhais, lengdon directed his son Thenkham to descend to earth and establish kingdom there. Thenkham was unwilling to leave heaven, and so it was arranged that his sons Khunlung and Khunlai should go instead. Lengdon presented them with an idol called Somdeo, a magic sword, or Hengdan, two drums to be used for invoking divine aid, and four cocks for telling the omens. Khunlung, being the elder, was to be the king, and Khunlai, the younger, his chief councilor.

Khunlung and Khunlai descended from heaven with their following by an iron (or golden) chain in the year 568 A.D. and alighted in the country of Mungrimungram, where the Tais or Shans dwelt without a king. On arrival it was found that, in the hurry of departure, the cocks and other gifts had been left behind. One Lango went back to fetch them, and was given as his reward the kingdom of China and also the magic Hengdan. Khunlung and Khunlai built a town in Mungrimungram. The latter by a stratagem ousted his elder

brother, who thereupon, taking the somdeo with him, went further west, and founded a new kingdom in Mungkhumungjao. He ruled for forty years, and then returned to heaven, leaving seven sons. The youngest, Khunchu, succeeded him, the others having been installed during his lifetime as tributary kings of other countries. The eldest son, whose kingdom was called Mungkang, inherited the Somdeo. Another son, it is said, was made king of era. In this connection, it is noteworthy that the Burmese rulers always called the Ahom princes their "brother kings". Mung means "country" and Kang "drum" or "poison" so that mungkang may be translated either as the "country of the drum" or the "land of poison". Apparently the former is the correct translation, as Ney Elias quotes a tradition that Samlungpha found a sapphire drum in the bed of the local river.

The usurper Khunlai ruled in Mungrimungram for seventy years, and his son Tyaoaijeptyatpha for forty years. The latter is said to have founded the Aijepi era, which is still current amongst the Naras and Burmese. He died childless, whereupon tyakhunjam, of the line of Khunglung and Khunchu, sent one of his sons to fill the vacant throne. This prince ruled for twenty-five years. On his death his kingdom was divided, one son Mungrimungram and the other Mulung on the Shueli river. The latter and his descendants ruled for three hundred and thirty-three years. When the line became extinct and another of Khunchu's descendants was elected king. One of his grandsons was Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam; he had a dispute with one of his brothers, in consequence of which he left the country and, after stealing the Somdeo from the raja of Mungkang, fled towards Assam.

The Brahmanical account of the origin of the ruling family is very similar to that invented for other kings of aboriginal stock who, from time to time, were induced to enter the fold of Hinduism. It is said that Vasishtha Muni had a hermitage on a hill east of Sumarpith. Indra held high revels there, and was one day seen by the Muni sporting with Sachi in his flower garden. In his wrath, the Muni cursed Indra, and condemned him to have intercourse with a low caste woman. This happened; and the woman, who proved to be an incarnation of Bidyadhari begot a son who was highly favored by Indra. He had many children, of whom Khunglung and Khulai were the eldest, and ruled in Mungrimungram. The subsequent events are as already narrated.

Sukapha was accompanied by a large number of followers. The chronicles mention various numbers between 480 to 9000.¹⁵ The object of founding a new kingdom in a hitherto unconquered land makes it convincingly clear that Sukapha was accompanied by a large number of followers most of whom were men. According to P. Gogoi, from the manner of description given in the buranjis, it appears that, barring others followers, the regular fighting force of Sukapha was nine thousand strong, as the contingent had three thousand matang or cooking vessels, made of copper, each for a squad of three men.¹⁶ Besides, Sukapha had with him 300 horses and two elephants leaving aside a number of swords called hengdang.¹⁷

Sukapha moved towards Patkai amidst dense jungles inhabited by ferocious tribes. But he conquered the region around the Daikham mountains south of

¹⁵ Gogoi, J, p.26.

¹⁶ AB, p.44.

¹⁷ Op-cit, p.257.

Patkai and entered the Naga territory wherefrom he crossed the river Khamjang and reached the Nangyang lake.¹⁸ He defeated the Nagas there and made it a province called Khamjang and appointed one Kang-Khru-Mong as its governor.¹⁹ Sukapha thenceforth marched towards the Patkai range and conquered the Naga territories. It is mentioned that so severely he had dealt with the Nagas that those unconquered voluntarily submitted to him.²⁰ Then he reached Numruk (Namrup) and Tipam and entered the valley of the Brahmaputra,²¹ in 1228 A.D. The whole course of action since his leaving Mao-Lung took a period of thirteen years.

Sukapha then moved from one place to another in search of a suitable place for his capital. The Tai-Ahom and the Assamese chronicles mentioned that in this way he moved to Abhaypur (Munklang Chekhru) in 1236 A.D., then to Habung, then went down-stream of the Brahmaputra to the mouth of the Dikhow river and thenceforth to Ligorigaon. In 1246 he reached Simaluguri and stayed there for some years and finally he reached Charaideo in 1253 A.D., and established his headquarter there.

At the same time of Sukapha's arrival, the land was inhabited by some tribes who were in their primitive stage of production. Among them, the Marans were occupying the region between the Burhi Dihing and the Dichang river, the Barahis were inhabiting the territory between the Dichang and the Dikhow-both on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. These regions were contiguous to Charaideo. As mentioned in the chronicles, Sukapha's men estimated the

¹⁸ DAB, p.6.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.7f.

²⁰ Ibid, p.8.

²¹ Ibid, p.8.

total population of both the tribes at about four thousand souls.²² The chief of the Marans was Badaucha and that of the Barahis was Thakumtha, both of whom Sukapha brought under his control by friendly means.²³ The chronicles mention that since then the Marans and the Barahis began supplying the Ahom kings with articles of their daily need.²⁴ Sukapha cemented his friendly relations with these local tribes by marrying their daughters and appointing their men as cooks (changmai) in the royal kitchen.²⁵ According to the Deodhai Asam Buranji since that time, there was an admixture of blood, and children were of mixed origin, as the Ahoms had not brought their wives when they first came and as they accepted wives only when they came here.²⁶

Thus by the middle of the 13th century, the Ahoms established a small kingdom centering round Charaideo, in performing which, they received all cooperation from the local tribes, who also belonged to the same stock of the Mongoloid racial group as that of the Ahoms. During the later Ahom rulers, especially Suhunmung the Ahom kingdom saw a great expansion in its territory and prestige. The Ahoms started new policies of administration which will be discussed in the dissertation and also the effects that it generated.

²² Ibid, p.100.

²³ ABS, p.10.

²⁴ DAB, p.101.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Some scholars believe that Sukapha had with him three wives, and bands of village folks including women and children had joined the march. Gogoi P, p.258.

CHAPTER-I

MUNDUNSUNGKHAM-THE CASKET OF GOLD: ASPECTS OF THE ECONOMY OF THE AHOMS

“The Kingdom of Assam is one of the best countries in Asia.... ”¹. Yet, Assam has always remained secluded entity.

Assam, and in particular the Brahmaputra valley², with which we are concerned in this research work, was very richly endowed with natural resources and beauty. When the Ahoms, led by Sukapha, first entered Assam, they were enthralled by its rich variety of flora and fauna. Sukapha went on to call Assam “Mundunsungkham” – a Tai word meaning a garden of gold. One of the main features of Assam in the Medieval times was that it could maintain a political and economic independence without much relation with the outsiders, due to the supporting base provided by its ecology.

Topography of the Region:

One of the main reasons behind the rich and fertile soil of the region is the mighty Brahmaputra, which intersects the whole valley. The two parts thus divided by Brahmaputra are called the Uttarkol and Dakhinkol or the North and the South banks respectively³.

¹ Tavernier, Jean-Baptiste, *Travels in India* Vol. II.

² The present Brahmaputra valley comprises of Goalpara, Lakhimpur, Darrang, Kamrup, Nowgoan & Sibsagar district. Goalpara hitherto a part of Rangpur district of Bengal was put under the jurisdiction of commissioner of Assam in 1825.

³ Robinson, William – *An Account of Assam*, 1841.

The alluvial deposits of Brahmaputra and its tributary streams lend great variety of fertility and elevation⁴.

That the soil was alluvial and fertile has been testified by other sources too. Mills says that "..... rich soil which was well adapted from its diversified elevation to the cultivation of every kind of crop".⁵ Mohammad Qazim author of "Alamgirnama" writes that the strength of vegetation and fertility of soil are such that whatever is sown or slips planted, they always thrived⁶.

The climate of Assam is also been a decisive factor in moulding the kind of vegetation that is raised here. "Perpetual humidity, frequent and heavy rainfall and moderate and temperature changes of warm summer and cool winter especially distinguishes the valley of Assam"⁷. Talish in Fatiyah –I-Ibriyah in the 17th century made a correct assessment of the climate of Assam when he observed, "it rains for eight months in the year and even the four months of winter are not free from rain". This type of climate generally favours extensive rice cultivation.

The excessive rainfall helped the Ahoms in extending the rice cultivation throughout the valley and bringing under their domain the various tribal communities, the details of this process will be discussed in the IInd chapter.

⁴ The other alluvial tracts are formed on the banks of Barnadi and Monase. In the number of rivers Assamese said to exceed other countries of equal extent. A total of sixty one rivers Robinson.

⁵ A.J. Moffat Mills-Report on the Province of Assam (1854).

⁶ Cited in H.K. Barpujari- The Comprehensive history of Assam.

⁷ A Das-Flora and Fauna of Assam, Vol I, Part I.

Apart from the fertile soil, nature has lavishly bestowed all her beauties on Assam. The hills, the forests, besides enhancing beauty of the land, contain valuable flora and fauna some of which are rare in the world.

The forests contain valuable timber like Sal (Shorea), Nahar (Mesera), Simalu (Bombax), Bola (Morus) etc in addition to various kinds of bamboos, canes, grasses and reeds. Lac and Agar (a much valued perfume), are two important forest products. The abundance of Chom (*Machelia*), Noon (morus), Era (Rienus), Champa (*Michelia*), Mezankari (*Tetrathera*) etc helps in rearing of silkworms, which nourishes the famous silk industry of Assam.

Assam is also rich in different kinds of citrus fruits like oranges, lemon, ou-tenga (*Dillenia*) and Thekera (*Garchiria*). Betel-nut and betel vine are so abundantly grown that they form the most common items in the daily Assamese cuisine. Among other common fruits, mention must be made of jack-fruit, mango, banana, guava, pineapple, leteku (*Baccaurea*).

The account of Shihabuddin Talish gives us a description of the situation that prevailed in the seventeenth century. According to it, the forests of Kajali⁸ are full of trees, the fruits are very large and juicy, and they used to be sold at the Mughal camps at ten for a piece. Houses and Orchards met the Mughals' eye as traveled from Kaliabor to Garhgoan, bamboo groves, and cultivated fields all the way from the homestead to the foot of the hills.

The chief crop is rice, but the thin and long variety is rare. Salt is rare and difficult to procure. Elephants abound in the hills and forests. Aloe Wood,

⁸ A forest in the present Nowgoan district of the Brahmaputra valley.

which grows in the hills of Namrup, Sadiya and Lachhowgarh is heavily coloured and scented⁹.

Mineral resources of various kinds are also abundant in Assam¹⁰.

The Mishmi hills, through which the Brahmaputra enters are also known to be abound in limestone rocks. They in general bear great resemblance to the mottled marbles of China though some are of more white crystallized form.

The coal beds of Assam are of very great extent. All along the Southern sides of the valley lie a series of carboniferous formations of rich variety¹¹. The coal is generally noticed in the east part of Upper Assam, in the hilly country of South and East of Brahmakund. The next rein of coal is to be noticed on the bed of Manirup river, as the small river empties itself into the Buri Dhing. Coal beds are found near Jaipur, Jorhat and Namrup.

Brine springs are not unfrequent in the low range of the Naga hills. These wells are wrought alternately by the Nagas and Assamese between whom the produce is equally shared. The salt obtained from these springs was said to be more highly priced than that imported from Bengal¹².

In the above localities there are also found frequent beds of clay, iron-ore, neither copper nor silver has yet been found native in Assam. A small quantity of the former is brought down occasionally by the Abhors. There is at present no more than one silver mine known to exist among the adjacent

⁹ Fathiyah-I-Ibriyah.

¹⁰ William Robinson – A descriptive Account of Assam.

¹¹ William Robinson.

¹² Francis Hamilton : An Account of Assam (1807-1814).

mountain tribes in the country of Bor-Khangtis¹³. This view contradicts the one made by Tavernier in the Travels in India Vol II, where he stated that "there are mines of gold, silver, steel, and lead and iron..."¹⁴ Perhaps, Tavernier's account was based on secondary information, due to which he could make such an incorrect statement.

The rivers of Assam are also famous for the availability of gold dust. Says Robinson, "Although not connected with any definite site within the valley there is scarcely a river through the whole valley that does not yield more or less of the precious metal"¹⁵.

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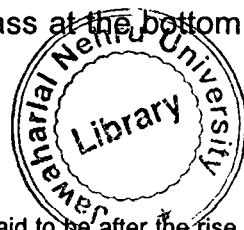
The best gold is said to have found in the most window streams having the strongest currents eg. Bharoli, Subasiri. The gold washers or Sonowals after selecting a favourable site for their operations¹⁶ begin this process by passing the sand through sieve in order to free it from the lumps of clay, stones and other refuse. It is then collected in a wooden trough with an inclined plane and having a narrow outlet at one extremity. Water is then thrown over the sand and the coarse and dirty particles of which are carried off in a great measure and the gold from its gravity with considerable mixture of fine sand, lodges in the transverse grooves of the trough, this residue is added a proportionate quantity of quicksilver and while the gold is uniting with it, water is poured over the sand to keep it in motion. The gold soon adheres to the quicksilver and forms a little mass at the bottom of the trough, this ball

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Tavernier, Vol II.

¹⁵ A Descriptive Account of Assam, 1841.

¹⁶ The most favourable time for wash for gold is said to be after the rise of water. The best spots are composed of spots of rivers which are around beds of small pebbles.



is then set put into a shell and placed over a charcoal fire by which means the quick silver is evaporated and the shell forms into lime, the whole is then thrown into a pot of water and the pure gold sinks to the bottom¹⁷.

This precious metal seems to have been washed down by heavy torrents of the neighbouring hills, the richer deposits being invariably found in the upper courses of the streams and fresh supplies are renewed with every monsoon. It is questionable if the metals exist in any of the veins of the neighbouring hills, but from what has been ascertained of the production of gold, it is likewise very probable that it was disseminated in minute quantities in clays and disintegrated rocks of the mountain from which the rains in each successive year gathers new supplies to replenish the exhausted sands. This washing of gold from the sands of rivers was an important source of income for the state. Talish estimated the value of gold thus collected to Rs. 80,000 to 108,000 annually¹⁸. During the days of Rajeswar Singha, sixteen thousand Sonowals contributed seven thousand tolas of gold per year to the royal treasury¹⁹.

All the major works on medieval Assam history insist on the self-sufficiency of the region. These historians profess that, the abundance of rich natural resources gave the people a self-sufficiency and complacency, therefore they indulged in very little trade, both internal and external. Since everything was produced locally, and the wants of the people were also very limited, they didn't have to go to others to get the things needed for survival. It

¹⁷ Robinson.

¹⁸ JBORS

¹⁹ S.L. Baruah, p. 413.

was therefore, the natural resources coupled with the favourable ecology that gave an economic independence to the region.

Yet, there are clear references in the Medieval literature that point to the existence of both internal and external trade. True, these trade might fade in comparison to the colossal amount of trade going on in the other parts of the sub-continent, yet it was far more significant than calling it to be a “no trade zone”.

True, the Ahoms rulers did stick to a policy of isolation, primarily because of security reasons. They were primarily alerted by the east ward expansion of the Kamata Kingdom. The threat to the nascent Ahom Kingdom came from the powerful enemy, the Sultan of Bengal, who had led several incursions to the Kamata Kingdom. Again as Bengal became a province of the Mughals in 1576, and since the Mughals followed a policy of eastward expansion a clash between the two forces became inevitable.

The Ahom foreign policy was therefore formed keeping these things in mind. They adopted a policy of isolation and a closed door policy and were determined to repulse any foreign attack. “Death is preferable to a life of subordination to foreigners”²⁰. For them Assam was their “casket of gold” – Mundungsunkham which they must guard from the foreigners. But to say that no external commerce took place during the Ahom period, or there was no internal transactions would definitely overlook many evidences in the sources. Though very scarce in number yet a careful study of these

²⁰ Ahom Buranji-ed S.K. Bhuyan.

transactions must be made to have a proper survey of the period, failing of which may have a serious vacuum in the history of the region.

The Vaisnava literature of the period holds a rich store of evidence that points out the existence of internal trade. The *charit-puthis* or biographies of the Vaisnava saints hold the evidence to this fact. Reference in Madhab-Kandali's Ramayan mentions "the Banias". Madhab-deva, the apostle of Sankardeva according to his biographer Ramanandaa Dviya at one stage earned his livelihood by trading in pearl and corals in Eastern Assam procured from Bengal. Mention has been made in Kathaguru Charit that one Narayan-Thakur alias Bhabananda earned his livelihood by sale of mustard seed and other commodities and that betel – leaf, ivory, gold, silk, black pepper which were sold out at a higher rate in Western Assam were available cheaper in Upper Assam²¹. Salt was a rarity and therefore trade was highly profitable. Dhanai Mudai of Dhuhhat and Hiramal of Hakarukuchi had transactions in salt and areca – nut in Lower Assam²².

Among the cash crops, the most important were mustard seed and long and black pepper. Mustard seeds were primarily used for extracting edible oil for burning lamp²³. Epigraphic records show that mustard oil was used for burning lamp and as for edible oil it was bought and sold in village markets in the period²⁴. But there is no record to show that oil was produced in such quantity so as to make it an item of export. Mustard was however

²¹ H.K. Barpujari –A Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. III, Pg. 122.

²² E.A. Gait-History of Assam, P. 153.

²³ KGC Although oil was extracted in almost every family from mustard seed, professional Telis used to supply oil to the royal house- hold and the aristocracy.

²⁴ Jahnabi Gogoi Nath – Agrarian System of Medieval Assam.p. 146

collected by the local traders called bepari and were exported to Bengal. In the beginning of the 19th century Francis Hamilton reports that Assam had annually exported as much as 15000 maunds of mustard seeds to Bengal²⁵. Within the Kingdom also there were some small local markets called "Sariyah-hat" where mustard seeds were largely sold²⁶. Pepper was used as spice and medicine. Its surplus was collected by the mudoi traders of Kamrup and exported to Bengal. Hamilton records that it was through Assam Chokey at Goalpura that an amount of 50 maunds of long pepper and 50 maunds of black pepper were exported to Bengal per annum²⁷.

Among other domestic products sold in the markets, mention may be made of areca –nut and betel leaves, pulses, like mug and mali, and jaggery. However in the Buranjis, there are no references of these items sold in the markets. But that areca-nut and betel – leaves formed universal items of trade throughout Assam can be known from both literary and epigraphic records.

Shihabuddin Talish who is almost silent about trade in upper Assam, speaks of buying and selling of areca-nut and betel-leaves even in the heart-land of the Ahom capital at Gargaon. 'the only traders who sit in the bazar', he says, 'are betel-leaf sellers'²⁸. The Guru Charits also speak of markets in the region round about the capital. It is said that a lady, the mother of a Vaishnava saint called Bhabanipuria Ata, managed a daily shop at Nazira-hat

²⁵ Hamilton- An Account of Assam. P.146.

²⁶ As recorded in the KGC that Gopal Ata one of the Vaishnava preachers of Assam traded in mustard.

²⁷ Upper Assam was recorded in Vaishnava biographical works as a land of agar wood, black pepper, gold, silk cloth, elephant tusks. KGC mentions mudoi traders from kamrup came by boat through Brahmaputra and collected mustard seed from the houses of the peasants in upper Assam.

²⁸ JBORS.

and used to sell goods contained in three to four paris of baskets (bhar) every day²⁹. From epigraphic records, it is learnt that one guchi (20 leaves) of pan (vine) usually cost 21 cowries, and one pon (80 pieces) of tamol (betel-nut) 1 ana³⁰. There were, however, such poor people who had not even that amount of cowries to buy one guchi of betel-leaves³¹.

In Kamrup, matimah cost 5 gandas (4 cowries =1 ganda) per ser, mug 40 gandas per ser, and gur 1 ana for one ser³². To the contrary, in Gargaon as Shihabuddin Talish records in 1662, mugdal and vetch (mati) were used to be sold for Rs. 10 and Re.1 each per ser³³. But that was an unusual time and local people when compelled to sell them might have demanded such soaring prices³⁴. It should be mentioned that while vegetable items like brinjal are recorded to have been sold in Kamrup in certain circumstances, record of sale of vegetables in upper Assam are not available to us³⁵. Other items of trade included cloths of various qualities and sizes. In Kamrup cotton towels (gamocho) were available in the village markets and the price of a gamocho was 4 pons of cowries³⁶. Production of cotton cloths grew as a profession all over the state during our period. In Kamrup particularly, certain places like Soalkuchi, Hajo, Lakharpara of Rangia and North Guwahati, Narayanpur in upper Assam were famous for fine and skillfully embroidered fabrics³⁷. The Tantis or the weaver class peasants of Kamrup were well known for their

²⁹ KGC, p. 250.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 87.

³¹ Ibid, p. 82.

³² PSN, 178, f pp.

³³ Sarkar, *Life of Mirjumla*, p. 322.

³⁴ *Because of the Ahom- Mughal War*.

³⁵ KGC, p. 237.

³⁶ KGC, p.87.

³⁷ MEAG, p.10.

products. Some of them used to weave cloth on some others behalf by taking wage at the rate of one pon of cowri per cubit³⁸. The Koch king Naranarayan is said to have orgnaised the weavers guild at Tantikuchi in Barpeta where variety of cotton cloths were produced³⁹. A major part of the cloth was sold out. Besides cotton, silk cloth –pat, muga and eri (endi) were also produced and part of these was sold in the markets. Hamilton records the prices of these cloths as follows⁴⁰:

Pat silk	Rs. 1 to 8 (as per size and quality)
Mejankari silk:	
Dhuti	Rs. 1 to 4
Mekhela	Rs. 1 to 3
Chadar	Rs. 2 ½ to 4
Mosquito curtain	Rs. 1 to 6
Riha	Rs. ½ to 3
Eri:	
Riha	4 to 6 anas
Cheleng	8 anas to Rs. 2
Cotton:	
Dhuti	Rs. 10 per piece
(finest one measuring 12 cubits by 3 cubits)	

According to Francis Hamilton, small dealers used to collect the items from peasant families and “hawk them about from house to house, for there were no shops and few markets (for cloth)”⁴¹.

The state had to export some items of value to Bengal to meet the need for salt and certain items of dress and luxury for the upper stratum of the

³⁸ KGC, p. 393.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 208.

⁴⁰ AAH, p. 62.

⁴¹ Ibid.

society. Shihabudin Talish noticed that formerly "once a year by order of the Raja, a party used to go for trade to their frontier near Gauhati, they gave gold, musk, aloe wood, pepper, spikenard and silk cloth in exchange for salt, sulphur and certain other products of India....."⁴². The export –import relations of Assam particularly with Bengal are evidenced by all contemporary records. In the beginning of the 19th century, -it is reported that silk thread and silk – cloths were exported to Bengal⁴³.

Towards the later part of our period imported salt was sold in internal markets in small quantities. The inscriptions recording the items and expenditure incurred in connection with the maintenance of two temples make mention of the prices of salt as 1 ganda per tola⁴⁴. In the internal markets, poor peasants were sometimes found selling edible ferns called dhekia and fuel wood (khari)⁴⁵.

Various kinds of garden fruits including banana, oranges, mangoes, pineapples etc. were common articles of sale in the markets⁴⁶. Shihabudin Talish mentions that at Gargaon during Mughal occupation oranges used to be sold at ten for a paisa⁴⁷. Occasionally some other items like chira (flat rice), sugar etc. were also sold in small quantities. Buchanon records that during 1808, 1,000 maunds of ghee and sugar worth Rs.1,000 were imported from Bengal⁴⁸. Ghee was mainly used by the priests for worship and lighting lamp

⁴² HAGH, p. 144.

⁴³ AAH, p. 45f.

⁴⁴ PSN, pp. 178ff.

⁴⁵ KGCP, T. 123.

⁴⁶ KGC, pp. 542 ff.

⁴⁷ B.K. Barua, p. 95.

⁴⁸ AAH, p.45.

in the temples, and by the people coming from outside Assam, as an edible item. In Assam, it was neither produced in large scale nor was it consumed by the people most of whom had such an abhorrence of ghee that they would not eat any dish which had a flavour of it⁴⁹. As a consequence, when the Mughal soldiers at Gargaon had to buy ghee, it was Rs. 14 per ser⁵⁰. Even milk was hardly sold in upper Assam and as late as the 19th century there was no goala (milk-man) caste to buy, sell and produce milk and milk – items on a professional basis⁵¹.

Besides agricultural and its ancillary produce, silk and cotton, items of bamboo – work like jakai, khaloi, pachi, kharahi, dala, pala, kula etc. were sometimes sold⁵². Horses, bullocks, cows, goats, domestic and wild bird like ducks, pigeons, tui bird and fishes sometimes formed items of trade⁵³. Artisan classes like potter, blacksmith and goldsmith might have sold a certain amount of their produce to obtain other necessities of living. There is a reference in the Satsari Asam Buranji to the buying of earthen pot (malacharu) by the paiks spending two cowries for each⁵⁴.

The price of the commodities, however, did not remain static. It varied sometimes region wise and sometimes as per the contemporary situation, and sometimes as per quality. Price of commodities were usually higher in Kamrup than it was in upper Assam, for example, while a gamocha was sold in Kamrup for 4 pons (4 anas) of cowries, the same cost 1 ½ ana in upper

⁴⁹ HAG, p. 146.

⁵⁰ Sarkar, p. 322.

⁵¹ AAH, p. 63.

⁵² KGC, p. 331.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 261.

⁵⁴ Kachari Buranji, p. 46.

Assam⁵⁵. Price rise was also due to famine, drought and internal instability, as Shihabudin Talfish records even matimah at Gargaon was sold for re. 1 per ser in 1662, an item which cost only 20 cowries in Kamrup in peace times⁵⁶. During the Moamariya rebellion production and population ran short and prices of even essential commodities rose to an unprecedented level. For instance, in the period after this rebellion when a great famine occurred, one pot of lime or rice (about 250 grams) costs Re 1 and one mango Re.1 to Re. 1-8 anas,⁵⁷. In normal times, price was, however, low all over Assam. The comparatively higher prices in Kamrup were due possibly to the repeated Mughal invasions.

The following tables, however, furnish us with the price of some agricultural products in the first half of the 18th century as found in a copper plate inscription of Saka 1661 (1739 A.D.).

Commodities	Unit	Price (Rs.)
Rice	Maund	00.14 approx
Milk	Maund	00.16
Grain	Maund	00.25
Salt and oil	Maund	00.30
Gur	Maund	00.08
Black pepper	Maund	00.08
Betel leaf	Bundle containing 20 leaves	00.069 per 40 bundles
Kalasis (Earthen pots)	Piece	1.00 per 643 pieces
Arecanut	Piece	1.00 per 5120 pieces

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 94.

⁵⁶ PSN, p. 180.

⁵⁷ TB, p. 111.

In other records of the same period, prices of some of these commodities are reported as follows:

Commodities	Unit	Price (Rs.)
Rice	Maund	00.25 to 00.50
Black gram	Maund	00.31
Pulse and Ghee	Maund	00.62
Oil	Maund	00.32 approx
Salt	Maund	00.47
Betel-leaf	Bundle of 20 leaves	00.06 per 20 bundles
Goat	Each	1.00
Duck	Each	00.06
Pigeon	Pair	00.03
Dhuti	Piece	00.31
Gamochoa	Piece	00.10

The erratic fluctuations of price in the records of the same period might be due to the difference in the freight charges, which markedly varied from place to place depending on the distance and difficulties of transport. Almost all goods were relatively cheaper in eastern Assam. Higher cost of living in western Assam was mainly due to the repeated invasions of the Muhammadans, from the early part of the 13th century till the battle of Itakhuli in 1681 A.D., political instability arising out of these prolonged contests

hindered agricultural operations. Moreover, ravages perpetrated by the Bhutanese particularly on the inhabitants at the foot hills often brought in shortage of food which intensified the increase of prices.

From the list of exports from Assam to Bengal as given by Hamilton, it is learnt, that even in the kingdom of Assam in the beginning of the 19th century, black-pepper and long pepper cost Rs. 10/-, raw cotton Rs. 5/- mustard seeds Re. 1.33 (approx), Thekera (Thaikal) Rs. 3/- Muga silk Rs. 174.61 (approx) and Muga cloth Rs. 233.33 (approx) all per maund. The cost was definitely much lower before the Moamariya insurrection.

The Tunkhungia Buranji informs us that the price of all eatables went up to an unprecedented level during the days of famine resulting out of the Moamariya rebellions, so that one lime-pot of rice (about 250gms) cost Re 1/- one mango Re 1/- and one bundle of arum Re 1/- or Re 1.50. but this seems to be an inflated reporting of prices designed to exaggerate the havoc created by the Moamariyas, as arum so abundantly grown everywhere in Assam could never have been sold at so high a rate.

Market System:

That there existed a certain kind of commercial transaction network, can be ascertained from the sporadic references to it in the sources. Hats the lowest rung in the market network was very much prevalent. There are references of the Ahom Swargadeos opening of hats. Swargodeo Pratap Singha is reported to have opened a hat at Dupargarh⁵⁸. Disposal of surplus

⁵⁸ SMAB, p. 57.

of produce was the primary objective of these markets. Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) set up a mart at Dalanguri, while his son and successor Suklengmung (1539-52) established another one on the bank of Dikhou for the new settlement after clearing the jungles of the two banks⁵⁹. Even Satyunpha alias Nariya Raja (1644-48) established a mart at Marangi to foster amicable relation with Cachar⁶⁰. Gadadhar Singha (1681-96) set up two markets Chakihat and Rajahat, Rajeswar Singha (1751-67) established a mart near the mouth of Disoi⁶¹. W.W. Hunter in the A Statistical Account of Assam (1879) pointed out that the district trade of most of the districts in the valley was carried out in the periodical fairs and the markets. The principal seats of commerce at the time of British occupation of goalpara district were Bilaspara, Bijni, Dhuburi, Nalbari. He further says that a considerable amount of the trade was done in the local markets⁶².

In almost all the districts of the Brahmaputra Valley retail transactions was mainly done in the hats, which were held bi-weekly or once in a week. This tradition continued even after the occupation of the valley by the British, only the number of hats had increased considerably. The internal trade of Nowgoan district was generally done in the weekly hats generally done was by the barter system⁶³. Soon after the British occupation, W.W. Hunter says that the district trade was carried on in the markets, principal ones among

⁵⁹ Asam Buranji.

⁶⁰ Kachari Buranji, p. 36.

⁶¹ Deodhai Buranji (ed. S.K. Bhuyan).

⁶² Hats markets are held on certain days of the week in almost all the villages. The hats or markets in the small villages along the garo frontear such as Damra, Jira are held once a week, and attended by a large nos. of garos especially in winter season – Hunter A Statistical Account of Assam.

⁶³ Gazetteer of Nowgoan District – 1978.

them being Nowgoan, Puranigudam, Kaliabor Dabaka⁶⁴. The District Gazetteer of Darrang District (1978) mentions the conducting of retail business in the district in weekly markets called hats, which finds mention even in the old gazetteers of early period⁶⁵.

W.W. Hunter in 1879 says that in Darrang district trade was chiefly carried on by means of permanent markets weekly markets, or hats held in several villages all over the District. The most important of these were those held on Sundays at Kaligaon mouza in the Mangoldoi Sub division and known as the Singwmari hat. The attendance in this market was very large, usually numbering from few to five thousand people. Some of the villagers came from a distance of twenty five miles with their surplus stock of grain, poultry, vegetables, fish, fruit, betelnuts etc. Even in the district of Sib sagar, W.W Hunter mentions that as consisting of non-trading Assamese, Jorhat finds mention as one of the important seats of commerce.

Ahom-Tribal Trade Relations:

The relation of the Ahom rulers with that of the tribals in the neighbouring hills forms an interesting episode in the history of the area. There was regular traffic between the people of the plains and the hills since the hillmen had to depend on their neighbour below for the necessities of their daily life. Ahom monarchs not only granted certain rights to the border tribes in the adjoining areas but also set up hats and fairs for exchange of commodities at places convenient to both. The old frontiers of Assam were

⁶⁴ Statistical Account of Assam

⁶⁵ Ibid.

roughly divided into four regions. The first one being the Bhutan frontier. Subject to payment of nominal tribute the Deb and Dharma Raja of Bhutan were allowed strips of land, commonly known as duars viz – Bijni, Chappa Khamar, Chappaguri, Buxa and Gorkola in the north of Kamrup and Buriguma and Kallang in the district of Darrang⁶⁶.

The Barphukan as the viceroy of Guwahati exercised generic supervision over the transactions with the merchants of Bhutan. During the weak days of the Assam government, the Darrang and Kamrup duars were made over to the Bhutanese in consideration of an annual tribute of local Bhutanese products.

“These Duars form the most valuable portion of the Bhootan territory, through them is procured either directly or indirectly almost every article of consumption or luxury...”⁶⁷.

The Bhutia traders did not pay any duty to the Barua⁶⁸ but none could carry trade without using the Barua as a broker. The Bhutias exchanged lac, woolens, yak-tails, gold-dust, salt, horses and Chinese silk for Assamese muga silk, cotton cloth and dried fish.

The Kariapar Duar formed the channel of trade between Assam and Tibet. Lhasa merchants came down and brought Chinese silks and other Tibetan products to the markets situated near the Kariapar Duar. Visit of the Bhutanese envoy to the Ahom capital have been carefully recorded by old

⁶⁶ Pemberton, PP. 97.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Officers put incharge of the Duars.

chroniclers of Assam. M Cosh traces the existence of a route from Sadiya to Tibet across the Himalayas and parallel to the Brahmaputra. Through this route, the Mishmis carried on their barter trade with the Kachi and Chinese, and it is through this route the Burmese repeatedly invaded Assam⁶⁹.

Confusions after the Burmese invasions followed by a period of unfriendly relations between the British and the government of Bhutan, the trade between the two provinces came to a stand still. The Duars ceased to be the highway of commerce; Seelpota and Dumra, hitherto, the centre of brisk trade, were now deserted. To revive this border trade in 1833, H.Rutherford the Principal⁷⁰ Assistant, Central Assam, set up some fairs and built an exhibition hall where he kept attractive merchandise. To his disappointment, the Bhutias never resorted to it, the few that came down preferred hawking from village to village. To settle the differences with the Bhutias and to explore the possibilities of traffic with China, the government of India deputed a mission in 1837 under Captain Pemberton, but it could not achieve the object in view⁷¹.

The relation with Khamptis, Miris and Mishmis were regulated by the governor of Sadiya known as the Sadiya Khowa-Gohain. The hillmen were kept in proper restraint by the enactment of stipulations under which they obtained facilities for trade and supply of their necessary articles and other concessions.

⁶⁹ Pemberton.

⁷⁰ H.K. Barpujari- Assam in the Days of the Company, p. 271.

⁷¹ Ibid.

The Nagas came in more frequent touch with the Assamese than other tribes. The Assam government obtained a considerable revenue from the import of salt and the Nagas depended on the Assam market for grain and other articles. This interdependence, contributed to a mutual good understanding between the two people. The Naga hills have in consequence been always accessible to the people of the plains, whilst Nagas have been always permitted to access to the markets of the frontiers. The salt that annually came from the Naga hills amounted to 650 maunds. Several vegetables and mineral substances were also found in the Naga hills like bay leaves, species of laurels and wild plants in considerable quantities⁷².

The Ahom government initiated steps to augment and facilitate this trade with the frontier tribes. A large part of this trade transactions takes place at several large annual fairs. There are four annual fairs attended by the Bhutias and their cognate tribes viz Dhubri, Udalguri, Kerkaria, Daimara and at Sadiya in Lahimpur a fair is held to which the Mishmis, Abhors and other hill tribes of the N.E. Province resort to for purpose of trade⁷³. The fair held at Dhubri in Goalpara is attended by traders from Bengal as well as hill tribes.

Mills also reported that for the encouragement of trade, hats or weekly markets are held in every duar which are recorded to be attended in large number by people from the hills and also by the plains. This trade is carried on without any restrictions and the greatest good-feeling exists between the

⁷² William Robinson- A Descriptive Account of Assam.

⁷³ Annual Report on Trade , 1877-78.

parties who resort to the hats, occasionally slight misunderstandings do occur, but these are settled without much trouble⁷⁴.

A kind of bilinguism was in vogue amongst the tribes especially amongst those of the members who had to maintain contact with the plain folks and the latter too, had to know tribal dialects, sufficiently enough to be able to carry on conversation with the hill people. The frontier wardens and governors of Assam had in their respective establishments number of men versed in the languages, customs and habits of the tribes. There were also tribal experts in the courts of the king, and their services were utilized in connection with a peace mission or a military expedition⁷⁵.

That there were regular and organized markets during the Ahom period can also be concluded if one studies the Ahom relation with the Jayantias. The Jayantia relation with the Ahoms were based on economic considerations. The Jayantias were largely dependant for their supplies of necessaries on the markets of the plains. So, the Jayantias had to be at the receiving end in any of the diplomatic relations between the two. At any slight breach of contact the Ahom rulers would cancel the passes and market rights to the Jayantias, which would generally get them in a fix. The greater proportion of the Jayantia population subsists in agriculture, which included the cultivation of potatoes, oranges, betel-nuts and betel – leaves⁷⁶. A considerable amount of them earned their livelihood by bringing down their product through the passes granted to them and sold them in the markets of

⁷⁴ Mills Report

⁷⁵ S.K. Bhuyan – Studies in the history of Assam.

⁷⁶ Devi. L. : The Ahom- Tribal Relations. pp. 170.

the plains and bought other commodities in which the hills were deficient in . Many of them would even earn their livelihood as porter carrying the potatoes to the market in the plains from where the Marwari merchants would load them into carts and convey it to Gauhati by road, from where it was shipped away to Calcutta and Upper Assam. The beginning of the commercial intercourse between the two was started at the Phulguri fair (1681)⁷⁷.

The relationship with the tribals of Khyrim also throws a great deal of light on the trading scene of the Ahom Kingdom. The relation of the Ahoms with the state of Khyrim was also basically commercial by nature. Like the Jayantias, the Khyrim state also obtained legal permission from the Ahom government to trade with the plains and establish markets there. This trade with the Assam plains were very profitable and organized. The trade was put under the charge of a head merchant called Kina Barua.

There is a reference of one Santosh Bangal⁷⁸ who after suffering heavy losses in Pandua, Sylet⁷⁹, where he was trading, fled and sought refuge under Kina Barua and expressed his desire to trade with Assam. After a certain period of time he gained more riches than Kina Barua himself. All this points out towards the brisk and lucrative trading relation in Assam.

Fairs As Means Of Promotion Of Trade:

Many fairs were held for the encouragement of inter change of trade with the Bhutias and other hill people living beyond the boundary, annual

⁷⁷ Ibid, pp. 136.

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ In the burajis the term "Bengal" is used to denote all groups of people who lived or came from outside the Western limit of Assam.

trading fairs were held in certain villages near the base of the hills. The most important among these was held at Udalguri in the north-west district near the Bhutan frontier, in February or March⁸⁰. It was attended by Bhutias, Tibetians and by the people of the plains from all surrounding districts and a few Manipuris. During the three or four weeks for which the fair lasts, a huge number of hill tribes visit the fair.

In 1875, the quantity of articles brought for sale by the Bhutias which may be classed as imports were the following – 250 ponies, value Rs. 15000, 111 sheep value Rs. 333, 23 dogs Rs. 115, 1989 mounds of salt Rs. 9945, 80 tolas gold Rs. 1600 – 5058 blankets, 101 yak tails, 100 mounds lac, walnuts 10,000 etc. exports from Assam consisted mainly of paddy, rice, cotton cloth betel nuts, cotton thread⁸¹.

A similar gathering of Bhutias took place at Kherker at the foot of the Bhutan hills near Lakshminadi. It was attended by a large number of people from the Darrang and neighbouring districts and a good deal of sale and barter went on⁸².

Another fair was held at Doomara within Bhutan territory about two miles beyond the British boundary. It was frequented by a class of Bhutias commonly known as the Sat Rajas of Chardwar. A brisk trade was carried on with Bhutanese traders the Bhutan bringing down salt, chillies, spices, manjit,

⁸⁰ W.W. Hunter – A Statistical Account of Assam, P. 144-145.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 147.

⁸² Ibid.

blankets, wax, rubber etc and taking away in exchange, paddy, rice, eria silk, and cotton, cloths etc⁸³.

The trans-frontier trade with Bhutan was carried through the Eastern Duars and with the Garos on the border hats under the control of Zamindars⁸⁴. Such trade was generally done by barter system. Apart from these a number of other fairs were held that saw a considerable amount of exchange. In Kamrup district is located the shrine of Kamakhya goddess. The principal gatherings at this shrine are the Purush- Avan held about January or February every year in celebration of the marriage of the goddess with god Kameswar, and the Manasa puja in September or October. These festivals were attended by large number of persons. Another celebrated temple situated at Hajo, a village six miles north of Guwahati, where the great attraction was the Mahamuni temple situated on the summit of a hill. These places were visited by a large number of pilgrims not only by the Hindus, but also the Buddhists from beyond the Himalayas. Annual fairs were held at these three places for trading purposes, the chief article of commerce being rice, cotton, pulses, cloth, oil-seeds, cattle etc⁸⁵.

In the Goalpara district periodical trading fairs were also held. The chief were the Dolgoma fair held in the month of January on the occasion of the anniversary of the death of the high priest of that place. "Another fair takes

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ In respect to Goalpara district.

⁸⁵ W.W. Hunter, PP 78.

place a Kathalmari in the same month and on similar occasion"⁸⁶. Over 10,000 people attended and a brisk trade took place.

Use Of Coins In The Period:

The above discussion brings in the question of the regular use of coins in the economic life of the people. It has been suggested that in the medieval times North-Eastern India, coinage was "a gift money" issued usually at the time of the coronation of its king to facilitate distribution of dakshina to the priests and present to the nobles⁸⁷. It has also been claimed that in the Kingdom of tribal people like the Ahoms, "the economy did not require coins"⁸⁸. There is no doubt that the Ahoms did not have either own coinage upto A.D. 1647. It is also true that the Ahoms were a tribal people who might not have initially depended like many other tribes on coinage for commercial transaction. But large areas of territories conquered by the Ahoms had commercially well organized societies, which had earlier experience of use of coinage.

In the Kachari territory in the Barak valley area silver coinage connected with the Harikela currency system had been in regular use for a longtime in the proto medieval age. Hence when first coinage was issued in the North-East especially in the Kachar area in the year 1442 of the Saka era, under the influence of the coinage of Tripura and the Sultans of Bengal, regional commerce was expected to become gradually familiar with coin-money.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ AB, 47.

⁸⁸ A.K. Jha cited in Barpyari, Vol. II, p. 150.

A very large number of coins issued during the reign of Gadadhar Singha (1681-96) may allude to the regular use in business transactions as well as offering gifts. The demand for coins may indeed be the reasons for introduction of the practice of issuing coins annually during the reign of Rudrasinha (1696-1714).

Shihab-ud-din who accompanied Mir Jumla during his invasions of the Ahom territory in 1662, observed in his *Fathiyah-l-Ibriyya* that "the currency of this kingdom consists of conch – shells and rupees and gold coins stamped with the stamp of the Raja"⁸⁹. On the other hand, in the 17th century J.B. Tavernier noted that in the kingdom of Assam gold is not coined into money but is kept in large and small ingots, which the people make use in local trade and do not export it"⁹⁰. A comparative study of both indicate that though gold was coined only on special occasions, silver coins were regularly used in trade.

Thus, the Ahom Kingdom like other parts of India, had a complex system of use of media of exchange. Different articles of utility and value were used as units of wealth or commodity money. Cowries, imported from outside formed the base of currency (atleast in some areas). Coins, which were used in economic transactions in the neighbouring areas of Jayntia and Kachari were in vogue in the nascent Ahom kingdom, though in small amount. With the increase in both internal and external trade during latter Ahom rulers, the

⁸⁹ Jadunath Sarkar – JBORS.

⁹⁰ Tavernier, II

demand for coins also increased and hence rulers Gadadhar Singha and Rudra Sinha minted coins in large quantity⁹¹.

Trade Routes:

Trade was also carried on with Mughal India through Bengal. There were four routes from Bengal to Assam, one carried by water and three by land. The river route from Goalpara was down the Brahmaputra and via the Jennai from Jamalpur and then after some distance along the Pabna river, a navigable branch of the Ganges. A voyage downstream from Goalpara to Calcutta ordinarily took a month and upstream about a week more. During rains the extreme velocity of the currents and accumulation of trunks and trees and boulders on the bank made it extremely hazardous⁹².

The first over land route lay through Murshidabad, Maldah, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bugwah, Goalpara. The second route was via Dacca, Dumary and through Sylhet, Goalpara and Singimari. The third route was through Sylhet, Ranigoa, Khanamukh and Gauhati. The last two land routes were almost impassable through rains. The first over land route and the river route were the most popular⁹³.

A major portion of trade carried to and from Assam was river borne. The river Brahmaputra was the main source of the riverine trade. The river being navigable led to the movement of goods from one settlement to the other. Though exchange, both riverine and overland existed in Assam, the

⁹¹ ABGB, p. 116.

⁹² Evidence shows that there were secret trades between Assam and the Mughal India carried on by Mughal traders since 17th century PAB.

⁹³ M'Cosh, p. 8-9.

river transport was more convenient and less costly and sometimes safer and quicker than roads.

“The river, inspite of the difficulties is very navigable. The river in the driest season of the year is navigable for the inland streamers up to the mouth of Debroo”⁹⁴.

Even the trade between Tripperah hills and adjoining areas of Sylet was almost entirely water borne the principal of these rivers being Khowai, Mannu, Langai and Singla. There were three waterways to the three bazaars of Lushai Hills at which the principal trade transactions took place⁹⁵.

Even after the British occupation, Brahmaputra continued to be the main route of transport of goods. The Brahmaputra saw the plying of steamers and the largest size navigable boats throughout the year. Tributaries Bharati was navigable throughout the year, by trading boats of 100 mounds or four tons burden. The principal traffic being carried on was tea, Inai rubber, mustard seed and lac. This was pertaining to the Darrang district in 1879⁹⁶.

District of Nowgoan- Numerous rivers and stream were characterisic of the area. The only river navigable throughout the year by steamers or native boats of 100 man or 4 ton burden was the Brahmaputra. The other main river was Kalang⁹⁷.

⁹⁴ Mills Report.

⁹⁵ Annual Report on Trade 1877-78.

⁹⁶ Statistical account of the District of Kamrup – W.W. Hunter Vol. I.

⁹⁷ Butter, John, p. 213.

District of Sibsagar- There were no towns in Sibsagar in Sibsagar in which the community were wholly or principally maintained by means of river – traffic. At Golaghat, river traffic was carried on to a little extent with Nagas who bring down cotton and vegetable which they barter for salt, fish, poultry. Jorhat was also a great seat of riverine trade, cotton and woolen clothes were the chief exports and silki and cotton the chief exports⁹⁸.

District of Lakhimpur-Situated on river bank and at places, near by rivers, the whole community lived by river traffic. The articles they dealt with were conveyed by water. W.W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam, 1879, noticed a considerable amount of river traffic in Guwahati as well. The report of the Guwahati officials for the month of Ramjan 1662, 32000 boats of various kinds were stated to have arrived here⁹⁹.

External Trade:

Inspite of the closed door policy of the Ahom rulers, gold, ivory, elephant, musked deer, excited the cupidity of the Western and Eastern neighbors. Three Assamese merchants Sonari Mudoï, Jaihari Mudoï and Narahari Mudoï who were trading in Sri Surya in Goalpara with the permission of Nawab of Dacca, promised the Nawab to establish friendly relations between him and Swargadeo Pratap Sinha. They came back with three agents of the Nawab with letters and presents. The King said, "He is a merchant and should have confined himself to trading activities. Why should

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Sarat ch. Phukan – Toponymy of Assam

he bring envoys from Bengal"¹⁰⁰. They were executed. This incident shows the existence of regular trading intercourse with the neighbours.

The attitude of the Ahom rulers underwent a change with the removal of the bogey of foreign invasion after the final expulsion of the Mughals in 1682¹⁰¹. In exchange for elephant tusks, pepper, musk, silk cloth, yak-tails, agar or aloe wood and aromatic plants, the Assamese merchants imported garments of various kinds, articles of daily use, salt, spices and chemicals particularly saltpeter and sulphur from Bengal¹⁰².

The Tungkhungias especially Rudra Singha abandoned the traditional policy of isolation and was keen in having commercial intercourse with the neighbouring countries. He is stated to have ridiculed the very idea of Mughal faujdar at Rangamati, in 1713, when the latter sought to establish trade relations with Assam, by dispatching a few boats laden with commodities. The monarch questioned "is this trade, if it is limited to the imports of a few mounds of salt from Bengal and the dispatch of two or four boats from our place? If the Nawab is intent on the establishment of regular commercial intercourse with us he should send his merchants to Jogighopa and Goalpara and our leading traders (*bar-mudoos*) will proceed to Kandahar Chokey with large quantities of valuable articles. If matters could be arranged on this link then only, they can deserve the states of hatbat or trade"¹⁰³.

¹⁰⁰ Jayantia Buranji (ed) S.K. Bhuyan, p. 55-6.

¹⁰¹ One of the main features of the Ahom history is the continuous war with the Mughals since early 17th Century. The fear of Mughal expansion was over with the battle of Itakhuli 1681, when the Mughals were pushed back till Manas.

¹⁰² Purani Asom Buranji, P. 120.

¹⁰³ Assam Buranji, N06.

In the list furnished by Hamilton, the most important article of trade between Assam and Bengal was salt for which an amount of Rs. 1,92,500 was expended out of the total Rs. 2,28,3000. The balance of items of luxuries for higher classes and a few foreign residents mostly in Upper Assam, as had been the situation in the first decades of the 19th century, was next¹⁰⁴.

To cite Pemberton –Assam usually imported 120,000 mounds of salt annually from Bengal but in 1808-09 it fell to 35000 mounds only, which was a result of the Moamariya uprising, which reduced the population of the country to more than half¹⁰⁵.

An Idea of the Assam – Bengal trade as had been in the first decade of the 19th century, can be gleaned from the following table.

IMPORTS

Commodity	Unit in Maund	Value of Rupees
Salt	35000	192,500
Ghie (Ghee)	1,000	1,6000
Fine pulse, Sugar, spices		2,8000
Stone beads, corals, sewels, pears		8000
Cutlery, and glass ware, paints, copper red lead		6,800
English Woolens, Taffetas, Benares Silk Cloth, Satin Gold And Silver, Cloth, Muslin		16,500
Shells (cowries)		100
	Total value	Rs. 228,300

¹⁰⁴ AAH, p. 45-6.

¹⁰⁵ Pemberton, p.84 f.

EXPORTS FROM ASSAM INTO BENGAL

Commodity	Unit in Maund	Value of Rupees
Stick lac	10000	35000
Mugasilk	65	11,350
Mugacloth	75	17,500
Ivory, bell metal, Iron hoes		8600
Manjista or Indian Madder		500
Black Pepper	50	500
Long pepper	50	300
Cotton with seed	7000	35000
Mustard – seed	15000	20000
Slaves		2000
Total value		130,9000

Source: Buchanon Hamilton

These data pertain to a period when there was a decrease in population, following the internal disturbances, otherwise Assam has always shown a favourable balance of trade. Its exports were greater than the

imports. The export from Assam exceeded in value. The imports into Assam in 1876-77 but in 1877-78 the reverse occurred when the total value of export trade amounted to less than 1/3rd of the value of import¹⁰⁶.

Assam also traded with Tibet, which was more profitable than the trade with Bengal. M'Cosh refers to as many as five routes leading from Sadiya into Tibet or China Proper¹⁰⁷. They were pass of Dibong, the Mishmo route, the Phungan pass to Manchee and China and the route by Manipur to the Irrawaddy and the Patkai pass to Bhamo on the Irrawaddy. The most important route was on the north-eastern side over the Patkai to the upper districts of Burma and thence to China. Through this route the Ahoms came to the Brahmaputra valley. Another route to Tibet runs across the Himalayan mountains parallel with the course of Brahmaputra. There is mention in Tabaqual-I- Nasiri of 35 mountain passes between Kamrup and Tibet, through which horses were brought to Lakhaunati¹⁰⁸.

Lientenant Rutherford stated that Khampa Bhutias or Lhasa merchants just before the Burmese invansion had "unreserved commercial intercourse with Assam". The commercial transaction between the two countries was carried on in the following manner. At a place called Chouna, on the confines of the two countries, two months journey from Lasha there was a mart established. There was a similar mart at Geigunshnr, four miles distant from Chouna on the Assam side. An annual caravan would repair from Lasha to China conducted by about twenty persons, conveying silver bullion

¹⁰⁶ Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and Adjoining foreign countries year 1877-78.

¹⁰⁷ Robinson 247.

¹⁰⁸ Mentioned in S.L. Baruah – A Comprehensives History of Assam, p. 441.

to the amount of one lakh rupees and a considerable amount of rocksalt for sale to the Assam merchants, the latter brought rice which was imported to Tibet from Assam in large quantities. Assam silk, iron, lac, skins, buffalo horns, pearls etc were also exported¹⁰⁹.

The opinion of certain writers that Assam had direct trading relations with China has not found enough evidence C.A. Bruce, the Commercial Agent Sadiya reported that every particle silver used in Assam was imported from China. The Sighpos purchased kutcha roop or silver from the Chinese provinces and carried these on the back of mules in parties of twenty to thirty at a time armed with swords and matchlocks to Mainkhowa in Hukwang and hence to Assam. There has been no evidence found till date to show a direct trade relation with the Chinese. During the period under review, commercial relations with China, if any, were through the intermediaries- Bhutia Garos, Khasis.

Market Regulations:

The Ahom rulers also had well organized market regulations. Internal markets were subject to market regulations and official supervision governing sales tax, prices of articles etc. Market tolls (Hatkar) were collected by Hatkhowas at the percentage of price of goods as fixed by the king, which varied from time to time. To collect duties and to control illicit transport of goods Chaukies or Chokies were established at strategic positions. Consequently on the erection of Solagarh by Pratap Singha (1603-41) a

¹⁰⁹ Pemberton, King Rudra Sinha is said to have established an extensive trade with Tibet.

custom house was established on the Brahmaputra at Solalpath or Sewal chokey to collect tolls on the Daflas and other tribes and duties on all goods coming from Kamrup and border areas¹¹⁰.

For conducting trade with Bengal, choukis or outposts were established at important centres and placed under the control of officers called Duaria Barua or Chakial Barua . Pratap Singha also established Chokies at Kajali and jagi and introduced tolls on markets and ghats¹¹¹. The chief custom house, Kandar or Kangrar, usually called Assam chauki by the English, was situated at a place called Hadira in Pergunah Bansi, nearly opposite of Goalpara¹¹². There were seven subordinate custom- houses on the banks of river, that form the boundary and several others by which goods might pass, but all duties are paid at Kandar, the others were merely to prevent illicit transit of goods. The Baruas paid annually Rs. 45000 to the king and were made to levy only the very moderate duty of ten percent on exports and imports. But the custom has been to leave this entirely to their discretion¹¹³, and the Baruas are said to have complete monopoly of the whole trade that pass through his hands.

After the British occupation of the territory, there were some changes brought into the administration of these Choukies, the Choukies were ultimately brought under the direct control of the government in 1833, during the period of T.C. Robertson as the Agent and Civil commissioner of Assam.

¹¹⁰ Hamilton

¹¹¹ Tungkhungia Buranji Pp. 181-82.

¹¹² An Account of Assam : Hamilton, PP 44.

¹¹³ Ibid

The abolition of the system of leasing out of these Chowkies to the Baruas, greatly increased the volume of trade between Assam and Bengal.

All these arguments go on to prove that trade was very much prevalent in medieval Assam. The commonly ascribed cause of a self-sufficient economy with no commercial intercourse, can be heavily contradicted. The latter Ahom rulers showed keen interest in promoting all types of commercial intercourse. The trend where we find an increase in the trading activities of the region during the reign of latter Ahom rulers may have been because of the removal of the fear of Mughal invasion in 1681 A.D. in the battle of Itakhuli. Earlier the Ahoms were apprehensive of establishing any sort of link with the western neighbours in the fear of Mughal incursion into the state.

Another reason might be the one given by Dr. Amalendu Guha, where he ascribes the gradual increase in the production of the area due to the intensive introduction of wet rice cultivation by the Ahoms. This wet rice cultivation also brought the tribal communities into its fold, this greatly increased the production and surplus was generated, which resulted in a spurt of trading activities of the people. Whichever period it may be the rich abundance of natural resources of Assam have always attracted people from far flung areas to trade with her.

It seems from the research of Lakshmi Devi¹¹⁴, where she mentions the presence of Marwari traders, actively involved in the transaction of commodities, that they came to Assam even before the formal occupation of

¹¹⁴ Ahom Irital Relations.

the region by the British. They might not have found mention in any of the chronicles, as the Ahoms referred to anybody coming outside the Western frontiers of its state as "Bangals". The statistics provided by Hunter in his two volumes written in 1879, show the existence in trading activities in all the major districts of Assam by the Marwari merchants. Thus, it would be logical to say that Marwaris must have been involved in the trade of the region since a longtime. This can be said, because that, when Hunter compiled this volume, in 1879, he says that the Marwaris were active in economic circuit since many years.

The English got an opportunity to enter Assam when the Ahom ruler Gaurinath Singha sent an appeal to Lord Cornwallis seeking military assistance to suppress the Moamaria uprising. Captain Welsh's stay in Assam, opened up the route to the further consolidation of their rule. They understood that Assam would prove to be an asset. The discovery of tea by C.A. Bruce in 1823, further strengthened their belief. Their desire was fulfilled in 1826, when by the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826, the ruler of Ava (now Burma) transferred Assam to its native ruler, but king Chandrakanta Singha having fled to Calcutta, the British incorporated Assam to the then British India¹¹⁵.

¹¹⁵ The British help was once again sought when the Burmese made three expeditions to Assam (1817, 1819, 1821) and they signed the peace treaty with the ruler of Ava on behalf of the Ahom ruler.

CHAPTER-II

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION OF AHOM SOCIETY

Stratification in a society occurs where the difference are ranked hierarchically. Societies are divided into hierarchical groups in a way that though various groups are considered in equal in relation to each other but within one group members are viewed to be equals. Two main criteria of social stratification are caste and class, but some other recognized units of stratification as wage, gender, race and ethnicity.

In this chapter we will try to highlight certain facets of the medieval Assamese society, discuss its uniqueness in contract to the rigid caste system of its other counterparts in the rest of India.

Assam is a melting pot of different races, languages and cultures.¹ Assam is a museum of a large number of human species ever found on earth; J.H. Mills has also remarked that "Assam is situated in one of the greatest routes of migration of mankind"².

Down the ages she received people of different strains, particularly the Indo-Chinese, Mongoloids, pouring into India, who added a new element to the country's population and culture complex.

¹ Sipra Sen – Tribes and Castes of Assam, pp.123.

² J.H. Mills – Assam Review,p.24.

The thirteenth century saw the coming of the Ahoms to Assam³. When the Ahoms led by Sukapha entered Assam, they had to deal with the indigenous tribes⁴.

The Ahoms were engaged in a struggle with the indigenous tribes and subsequently were successful in carving out a niche for themselves. Their tactful dealing with the indigenous and the neighboring tribes resulted in making them the unchallenged masters of the whole valley for a period of six hundred years, which remains unparalleled in the history of India.

Suniti Kumar Chatterji states that when the Ahoms came to Assam, they met Hinduised Bodo States, viz; the Chutias in the extreme east, the Dimasa or Kacharis in the Dhansiri valley. The exact situation in Western Kamrupa is not known. Probably the Lunar Dynasty of Vallabhandeva an old Assamese speaking dynasty of Bodo origin was there.

The society that emerged consequently saw an amalgamation of all the indigenous tribes, which resulted in a society, unique, in its own way, different from the caste and class stratified places of India. There is also a debate regarding the Sanskritization of Assam. References of Kamrup in the epics and Puranas, rock inscriptions going as far as the fifth century, testify that the process of Sanskritisation had begun as early as that. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee⁵ argues that Aryanisation of the ruling classes in Western Assam was completed by Circa 400 A.D. Amalendu Guha⁶ says that Chatterjee's

³ The background and coming of the Ahoms discussed in introduction.

⁴ Tribes like Naga, Aka, Daflas Chutias.

⁵ The Places of Assam in the history and civilization of India, p.35.

⁶ Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, p.2.

claim cannot be wholly accepted, as, even after this the tribes of the valley continued to maintain their own speech, funeral rites and religious beliefs.

Guha was right as a close examination of the religious beliefs and their comparison with their counterparts of India prove that in their socio-religious life, though the varna and Brahmanical religion, had penetrated into Assam at a very early period, yet they could not make much headway as compared to other parts.

This was because, Assam being situated far from the heartland of Indo-Aryan culture, found less adherence to the newly introduced Indo-Aryan culture. This might be one of the reasons for the fewer number of Brahmins in Assam, whose influence was much less dominant here as in other parts of India. Nevertheless, it added to the development of caste system in Assam eventually. In shaping the caste system in Assam, the various non-Aryan local practices relating to marriage, economic pursuits, religion, tribal totemism etc provided a base. As a result of the interactions of the two culture many new castes emerged in the Assamese Hindu society which have no precedence in the Pan- Hindu social hierarchy. One such example is the Koches, an aboriginal tribe of Assam, which became a Hindu caste through proselytization.

It would appear in fact that a large number of castes had their origin in different ethnic groups. In the process of adaptation to Hinduism they entered into the caste fold by assuming the caste names mostly after the names of their respective ethnic groups. In fact tribes like the Rabhas, the Kacharis, the

Meches and many other were drawn into the Hindu system of caste organization through a process of assimilation with Hinduism. The Assamese Hindu priestly class, played an important role in introducing these tribes into caste or *jati* system strictly speaking. Gunabhiram Barua says that the causes for laxity in the occupational rigidity as criteria for caste hierarchy regard may be attributed to the absence of the development of any specialized artisanry or a monopolized skill in any single occupation of the Hindu castes. He also believes that the impact of Buddhism on the early social organization of Assam⁷ may be a cause for this Besides, agriculture was the most important economic activity of the people in which all sections were permitted to participate. Although a strict Hindu caste system forbids a Brahman from ploughing the fields, the Brahmana sage Baistha, the famous hermit, is believed to have ploughed the paddy fields himself⁸. In reality for the purpose of achieving social integrity and homogeneity amongst the diverse population, a certain amount of flexibility had to be given to the caste system in Assam.⁹

It is evident that the pan-Indian system of varna and caste could not be adopted in Assam in the same pattern. The Nidhanpura Grant says that Varnasystem in this country, was in a confused state and Bhaskar Varmana¹⁰ was born for the purpose of bringing it back to order.¹¹ It appears, therefore, that from the beginning a modified or distorted Varna system was followed here. Consequently Assamese Hindu Society, in place

⁷ Sarma, A.C. Tai – Ahomsystem, p. 30.

⁸ Ibid, p.30.

⁹ Sarma, Amulya Chandra- Tai-Ahom System, pp.30.

¹⁰ Bhaskarvarman, ruler of Kamrupa from (594-690 A.D.) of the famous Varman dynasty.

¹¹ Cited in H.K. Barpujari-A comprehensive History of Assam.

of four varna had only two-viz. Brahmanas or the Sudhras (pronouners Sudhirs). Although the existence of the Vaishya order cannot be ruled out, it is certain that the Aryan-Kshatriya did not exist here.

The term Sudra, in fact, is a very wide category which include a large number of castes. In Assam, the non-Brahman castes with varying degrees of cultural assimilation are included in the Sudra category. At one end there are highly Sanskritised castes like the Kalitas and at the other end there are other castes entering into the Hindu fold only with marginal assimilation. The non-Brahmin castes, excluding the untouchable are generally referred to as the Sudras.

In between the Sudras and the Brahmanas, there is another caste named the Kayastha, whose position in the varna category is not definitely ascertained. The Kayasthas are given a position next to Brahmanas and constitutes a priestly class for the non-Brahmin castes. Yajnavalkya Smriti and the Vishnu Dharmasutra refer to the Kayasthas, as administrative officers. The Vedya sasmriti includes them in the category of the Sudras. D.R. Bhandarkar holds that they were the descendants of the Nagar Brahmins. But no evidence supporting this view is available, and the kayastha are a generally regarded as belonging to the Sudra category in Asaam.¹²

Compositions Of The Society:

The sources of the medieval period in Assam spanning from the thirteenth century to the eighteenth century, provide us with ample

¹² Amulya Sarma, Tai-Ahom System, p.35.

materials to reconstruct the social life of the people of Assam. These sources are by and large the chronicles (Buranjis), genealogies (Rajvamsavalis), biographies (*caritas*) of Vaisnava saints and preachers, inscriptions of the Ahom and Koch kings. The accounts of Muslim historians and foreign travellers also shed light on the social life of the period under review.

At the top of the social ladder were the Brahmanas. When the Ahoms came to Assam, they came into contact with the Hindu and the non-Hindu population. The Hindu population consisted of the Brahmans, the Sudras and the tribal converts. The non-Hindu population consisted of the tribal people who lived in their own carved territory. Since the Aryanisation process dates back to as early as the 4th century A.D. we have references to Brahmans since then. Mention is made in Dubi and Nidhanpur copper plates of King Bhaskarvarman of Brahmana donee who used to perform sixfold duties viz. yajna, yajana, adhyana, adhyapana, dana and pratigraha.¹³ From the thirteenth century onwards fresh waves of Brahmna from Gauda, Kanauj and other parts of North India migrated to Assam. Some learned Brahmana families were also brought by the kings to reinforce the Brahmanical tradition. The medieval literature indicates the presence of large number of tolls or chatrasalas manned by Brahmana scholars. The Brahmanas did not personally plough the fields, and they earned their livelihood by means of agriculture, teaching, priestly duties and services to the state. Hamilton¹⁴ mentions two sections of Brahmins, Radha and Vaidiks, whose distinction is made on the basis of localities from where they migrated from. Those who

¹³ H.K. Barpujari- p. 170.

¹⁴ Francis Hamilton- An Account of Assam.

migrated from Western parts of Bengal were known as Rarhi and those from Kanauj as Vaidika.

The Daivajnas or the Ganakas, being professional astrologers, studied astrology and earned their livelihood mainly by astrological calculations. The earliest reference to Daivajna is found in the Kamauli grant of Vaidya Deva of twelfth century. Reference to Daivajna is found in the literacy works of Durgavara Sukavinarayana and in the land grants of the Ahom kings. Harihara Ata, one of the foremost disciples of Sankardeva was Daivajna by caste. The Ahoms kings maintained learned Daivajnas in the court to consult before commencing any auspicious work or starting a war against the enemies.

The Kayasthas, originally a professional class, were engaged in maintaining accounts and serving as scribes. In the Nidhapur grant of Bhaskarvarmana both Karanikas and Kayasthas are mentioned. During early medieval period some Kayasthas managed to carve out principalities for themselves under the control of the Kamata kings. The great Saint Sankardeva's family hereditarily who enjoyed the office of the chief among the Bhuyans (Shrimoi Bhuyans), was of the Kayastha community. Scholars like Nagendra Nath Basu have tried to prove the Kshatriya origin of the Kayasthas.¹⁵ By discarding asi (sword) they took to masi (ink) and therefore, were downgraded from the kshatriyas. The Kayastha neither ploughed nor carried load on the shoulders. They used to perform the six sacraments for which they were called Satkarni.

¹⁵ Kayastha Samajar Itivritta,

The Kalitas were more numerous than the Brahmans or the Daivajnas. They are scattered all over the Brahmanputra valley. The origin of the Kalitas is obscure, but since the beginning of the fourteenth century they have been occupying a respectable status in the Assamese social life. It has not been definitely established whether any relation ethnic-or cultural -exists between the Kalitas of Assam and those of Uttarpradesh and Orissa. The Kalitas of Assam are caste Hindus, but those of Orissa and Uttar Pradesh are treated as backward tribes¹⁶. Some scholars, notably P.C. Choudhary and K.R.Medhi have tried to prove that the Kalitas migrated of the Eastern India before the vedic Aryans and were members of the Alpine stock.¹⁷ On the other hand K.L. Barua, is of the opinion that the Kalitas though originally belonged to the Caucasion stock imbibed some Mongolid traits,¹⁸ due to the long association with the Indo-Mongloid elements. But although Kalitas are supposed to be one of the earliest Caucasian groups, no reference to them is made in any of the earlier records or literature. It is noticed only in the biographical works of the seventeenth century and royal grants of the eighteenth century. According to the Katha Guru- Charita, there was a Kalita desa on the Himalayan foot-hill in the north eastern region where the ancestors of Gopala Ata lived.¹⁹

The Kalitas were however divided into Bar-Kalitas and Saru-kalitas i.e. the higher and lower Kalitas. Generally the Kralitas who intermarry with the kalitas themselves were called Barkalitas. During the Vishnavite movement

¹⁶ Hunter, Statistical Account of Assam.

¹⁷ H.K. Barpujari- pp. 172.

¹⁸ Katha Guru Charita- 249.

¹⁹ Katha Guru Charita-249.

many Kalitas rose to the position of the eminence as religious preachers and initiated disciples as religious gurus. The Kalitas besides being agriculturists also practiced various crafts and profession without seriously affecting their caste status. Thus, pottery, blacksmithy, bell-metal craft, goldsmithy, the art of dancing, dyeing and washing clothes of religious establishments were adopted as additional professions besides tilling soil²⁰.

The Keots occupy the position next to the Kalitas. The origin of the Keot has not been dealt with by any scholars either from the anthropological or from the cultural point of view. But it is beyond doubt that it originated from the Sanskrit Kaivarta which became kevatta (boastmen) and finally keot.

The Keots were classified into two water-tight compartments. The Haloi keots are treated as upperclass Hindu whereas the Khaloi, who are primarily a fisherman community were considered as depressed class. The Assamese Kaivartyas living on the banks of river were erroneously called the Doms, though they never performed the works of the Dome or Candallas of other regions. William Robinson speaks about the Kaivartas in good terms. "They seem

to serve all the rules of purity in eating and drinking with greater strictness than even the Brahmanas of Bengal"²¹ The Koches or the Rajavansis are related to the Bodo-kachari group of the Indo-Mongoloid stock. When a section of them after assuming the political power came under the religious influence of Brahmans and Vilshnavite preachers and was converted to full-

²⁰ Kakatil, Kalita Jatir Itibriita.

²¹ Robinson William – A Descriptive Account of Assam.

fledged Hindus, they assumed the name Rajvansis or Koch. Although they were not given the status of Kalita, or the Keots, yet they were assigned a higher status in the caste ladder. The Koch rulers ruled over Western Assam and North Bengal from sixteenth century to the middle of seventeenth century²².

The Ahoms were also considered a separate caste. They accepted Hinduism but did not, like the Koches, adopt all the Hindu-rites and rituals prescribed by the Smirtis for Sudras. Some of them became adherents of the Vasihanvism while others followed Saktism. As the Ahoms did not discard their old faith and customs, they were given neither the status of high class Hindus nor were treated as a lower or depressed class.

Others such as the Chutias, Kacharis, Marans and Barahi, the tribes who ruled in eastern Brahmaputra valley, only the ruling families of the Chutias were Hindus. The kings ruling in the Western valley namely the Khens, the Bhuayns, were also Hindus.

The Muslims formed a small community. The invasion of Muhammad bin Bhaktiyar Khalji (1206 A.D.) set the process of the Muslim settlement. Since then successive Muslim settlers came and in course of time became completely Assamese in speech, manners, dress, customs, except their religion. Small wonder that Shihab-uddin Talish remarked that Muslims in

²² Ibid.

Assam were more sympathetic towards their Hindu neighbours than their co-religionists in India.²³

Tribes men, both unassimilated as well as semi-assimilated, spread over the entire valley governed by their age-old customary laws, practices, and institutions. But there were some common features in their mode of land holding, institutions, social customs and usages. Some of the significant tribes of that period were the Bodo-Kachari spread over the entire valley of Brahmaputra and present Cachar District. The Kacharis gradually converted to Hinduism.

The Dimachas of the Bodo-kachari stock hitherto ruled over the entire south bank of the Brahmaputra from the Western Nagaon district to the easternmost of the Brahmaputra in the present Sibsagar district.

The Khamtis, the Doaneahs, the Tai-phakes, the Turungs, the Aitanyias and the Naras are small Buddhist communities which migrated to the north-eastern region of Assam from the early part of the eighteenth century.

The most remarkable feature of the tribal life and society is the democratic basis of their social and administration organizations. Tribals of the plain areas, having come into contact with Hinduism, particularly the liberal Vaisnavism, not only venerated some of the Hindu deities but equally paid homage to their traditional Gods and Goddesses. Though majority of the people came under Hinduism in different phases, yet large chunk of the

²³ JBORS.

indigenous people living in hills and plain maintained their separate identities. The cultural influence of Hinduism on the tribal life varied from community to community.

Occupation Divisions:- The Kalitas who were the most numerous of all the castes and sub-castes, dabbled in all sort of professions irrespective of them being primarily an agriculturist group.

There were some professional communities too, like those of the Tantis (weavers), Hiras (potters not using the wheel), Sonowals (gold-washers), Telis (oil-men), Nadias (fishermen), Haris (scavengers), but only a few like the Hiras formed a real caste. As stated, most of the professions like those of goldsmithy, blacksmithy, pottery, dancing, garland making were performed and monopolised by the Kalitas (who were subsequently termed as *saru-kalitas*-the inferior kalitas) in order to distinguish them from Bar-Kalitas, who could acquire affluence, learning and made themselves *Bhuyans* (landlords) or merchants and subsequently head of certain *satras*. To establish their superiority, these kalitas then began to introduce themselves as *Saj* (pure) or *Bar-kalitas* (superior kalitas), and refuse to marry with the *Saru-kalitas*.

Again, though the Tantis were the professional caste for weaving, yet every household in Assam had a loom and spinning wheel, even the upper castes. It was universal popularity of weaving in Assam which led the Bengali preacher Pandit Srinath Shastri to remark that it was only in Assam that he found justification for the alleged derivation of the word "wife" from "weave"²⁴.

²⁴ Bhuyan, S.K., *Studies*, p.69.

Mahatma Gandhi is also said to have remarked that "Every woman is born weaver. No Assamese girl who does not know to weave can expect to become a wife, and she weaves fairy tale in cloth"²⁵. The Medieval Assamese Society was thus free from stratification on basis of occupation the flexible caste system allowed people of one caste to take up any occupation. Hence, we see the Kalitas, a caste Hindu taking up all kinds of occupations. Even, there are instances of Brahmans taking to agriculture. This flexibility was because of the percolation of the strong tribal traditions into the Hindu system.

The organization of the society by Paik System:

In the absence of a rigid caste divided society, the basis of stratification was made on division of offices. This new social gradation was the 'Paik system', which was initiated by the Ahom Swargodes. This Paik system that Ahoms started, brought into its fold the various components of the society, thereby giving the whole social structure a new and different base of gradation.

The Paik system evolved, as a process by the Ahom rulers to bring the whole populations into its fold and utilize its services to serve its own purpose. The Paik system grew out of a relation, which the conquering Ahoms established with the tribes of the South-Eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley. The Marans and the Barahis, who were the earliest of the tribes to be subjugated, had not yet passed the stage of tribalism. In this stage, of undeveloped production, they tilled their communal land with more or less

²⁵ Ibid, p.70.

primitive equipments and supplemented their living by fishing, hunting etc. The Ahoms came there with a knowledge of an improved mode of production namely wet rice cultivation or Sali kheti, which superceded the existing ones. They were eager to exploit the conquered and therefore, establish a sort of tributary relation with them, sometimes by agreement and sometimes by application of force, which assumed the form of virtual slavery. Thus Sukapha,²⁶ introduced a system of exacting personal service from the members of the tribal communities, who were to serve as fuel-suppliers, water-drawers, honey suppliers etc. As the exigencies of daily life increased, the Ahoms who were also keen for armed intercourse, exploited them more eagerly. Meanwhile, they advanced westward and northward and conquered territories, where because of the spread of the use of the plough and irrigation, the mode of production and social relations reached a relatively advanced stage. Alongside, the Ahoms acquired personal or private property. Soon the ruling tribe of the valley divided into two classes- the rulers and the ruled, the latter tending to identify itself with the rest of the subject population, the non-Ahoms. The ruling class continued to maintain the same relational pattern once established with the tribes of south-eastern part of the valley. With the extension of the Ahom power, the load of administration work also increased, which necessitated the appointment of different new officers. In order to meet the internal exigencies, they now elaborated the existing system of exacting personal service from the subjects. The result was the Paik or khel system, systematically implemented by Momai Tamuli Barbarua,

²⁶ The first Ahom rulers.

under the patronage of king Pratap Sinha,²⁷ which was more rigidly enforced later in the days of king Jayadhvaj Sinha.²⁸ This rigour and speed of systematising the old practice of exacting personal labour was inevitable by a potential threat to the Ahom power coming from the west in the form of Mughal invasions. This, thus appears to be one of the deciding factors in reorganizing the society, which also proved effective in recruiting soldiers to build up resistance against the Mughals.

Different historians put forward different views regarding the origin of the Paik system. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, an eminent and leading historian of Assam history, feels that the Paik system had been organized on the lines of Mansabdari system of the Mughals.²⁹ Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan in an earlier instance expressed a view that there is also a similarity between the Paik system and "Karvee" (Crvee) system of France. Under this system too, the subjects of a village had to work in public works without anything in lieu. It was also therefore a system of exacting personal labour.³⁰

Another set of scholars opine that the Paik system had its origin in some areas in South-East Asia, from where the Ahoms migrated. This view seems to be very acceptable, because, though Momai Tamuli elaborately put into practice the system in the seventeenth century, it was already prevalent in its rudimentary form since the days of Sukapha. Buranjis clearly refer to the prevalence of Paik system even in the earlier days of the Ahom government.³¹

²⁷ Pratap Sinha ruled from 1603-1641.

²⁸ Jaydhvaj Sinh ruled from 1648-1663.

²⁹ Bhuyan expresses this view in "Lachit Barphukar and his Times".

³⁰ Cited in Amiya Devis- "Swargodes Rudra Singha", p.80.

³¹ Purani Asom Buranji, Satsari Asom Buranji, p.110.

According to these, then three Paiks formed one squad. These chronicles say that three Paiks cooked their food in the one pot.

Twenty squads of Paiks were commanded by a Ru-Sao (ru-head, Sav-twenty), or "head of twenty", one hundred were commanded by a Ru-pak (pak-hundred), or "head of hundred" and one thousand was commanded by a Ru-ring (ring-thousand) or "head of thousand"³².

This early system seems to be organized in the same way as prevailed in their homeland in Mong-Mao and Mong-Mit, and for that reason similar to other Thai states in Southern China, northern Vietnam and northern Thailand in the thirteenth century. Therefore, the Paik system was in vogue much before the Mansabdari³³ system which was initiated by Akbar in the Mughal Empire.

Under this Paik system every adult male between the age of 16-50 was registered as a Paik for state service. Four Paiks (later) formed a unit called *got*. The Paiks in a *got* rendered service in rotation, one Paik serving for a period of three (later four) months a year. The cultivation or domestic concerns of the Paik on duty was looked after by his comrades in a *got*. In times of emergency two, sometimes three Paiks were recruited from each *got*. The first levy was called a *mul*, the second *dewal*, and the third *tewal*³⁴.

³² DAB, p.6.

³³ I.S. Mumtaza, The Early Form of Government of Ahoms in Journal of Assam Research Society, Vol. I- Benudhar Sharma.

³⁴ Assam Buranji, DAB.

Some Paiks were also organized into professional khels, each rendering a particular kind of productive work like boat-building and arrow-making for the state.

The Paiks, besides rendering their personal service to the state, had to fulfill some other obligations to their masters as well. For example when called upon to do so, they were to cultivate the lands of their master and had to offer them gifts on certain specific occasions. Being tied to a fixed khel or territory, they were not free to pursue independent trade and thereby to improve their material conditions. Their way of life was fixed by the state, wherein they had no right to alter. Only by paying a commutation fee of Rs. 3/- per head per annum could a Paik sometimes obtain exemption from personal service.

The Paiks were divided into two classes the Kanri and the Chamua³⁵. The regular peasantry which was bound to give compulsory service to the state were called Kanri paiks. Those paiks working as tenants in private landed estates of nobles were called bilatias and those allotted to temples and satras were called dewaliyas. They were exempted from paying a large number of taxes and exempted from going to battlefields.

Paiks of good birth or relative affluence were called Chamua Paiks. They could invariably enjoy exemption from personal state services by paying commutation money. They usually consisted of the disposed Bhuyans, or

³⁵ TB,p.237.

landlords, members of the Chutia nobility, artisans etc. The junior offices like those of Bora, Saikia, Tamuli, Rachani were given to them³⁶.

Each Paik in return for his service to the state was allotted to two puras of best arable land called ga-mati, free of charge. The land, however, belonged to the khel and a Paik, had no jhereditary³⁷ claim to it.

The control of the state over the Paiks was very rigid. Over each twenty Paiks, there was an officer called Bora, over him was a Saikia commanding a hundred paiks, then a Hazarika commanding a thousand paiks and then a Phukan, commanding 6000 paiks³⁸.

Hierarchy in Ahom State:

Thus in the Ahom system, stratification was in order of their offices. At the top of their hierarchy was the king called the Swargode. He was the 'Chao', the lord of his people, who always belonged to the hereditary royal family claiming his descent from the two legendary khuns (kings)_ khunlung and khunlai sent to earth by lord of heaven.³⁹

Next to the king was the council of five known as Patra Mantris consisting of Burhagohain, Borgohain, Barpatra gohain, & Barbarua & Barphukhan. It was their duty to select a king from amongst the legal claimants should there be a problem of succession. If united they could depose a monarch. In case of delinquency, however, the king could remove a gohain from his office with the concurrence of the other two " A powerful

³⁶ Ibid, p. 238.

³⁷ Jenkins Report, Para 15.

³⁸ AAH,p.74.

³⁹ See introduction.

sovereign could override the decision of the three Gohains and an astute Gohain could impose his will upon his colleagues and upon the large body of Phukans and Baruas and upon the king himself".⁴⁰ The government was thus a combination of "limited monarchy and oligarchy". A strong and astute king could carefully maintain the power-balance but often there were cross interests between the king and the nobles and each party tried to overstep the limits in exercising its power, which gave rise to endless troubles towards the end of the Ahom rule.

To each of the Dangariyas, the king assigned territories in which they exercised most of the rights of independent sovereignty. In times of war, they supplied soldiers to the king's army and in normal times contributed labourers for carrying on such works as construction of roads, bridges and temples. Within their respective territories, they could even inflict the penalty of death, but not in a form which involved the shedding of the criminal's blood. The Gohains took the field, when necessary, and all important matters connected with defence, survey or settlement were carried on under their direct supervision. The authority of the Buhagohain, who was conventionally regarded as the senior most of the Dangariyas, extended from the north of the Dihou river to Sadiya. The jurisdiction of the Bargohain extended over the area from the south of the Dikhou river to Kaliabar.

The offices of the Barbarua and the Barphukan created by Pratap Singha in the early part of the 17th century were not hereditary and could be filled up by any member of certain specified families excluding those of the

⁴⁰ Relations, p. 219.

hereditary Gohains. The Barbarua was the chief executive officer and the head of the Judiciary, who, however, could not act independently of the Gohains. He was allotted territories lying outside the jurisdictions of the Gohains in upper Assam along with the service of 14,000 paiks who were bound to render service to the king as well in times of emergency⁴¹. The Barphukan was the Viceroy, who had his headquarters first at Kaliabar, and then at Kajali. Initially, he governed the tract between the Brahmaputra and the Kalang in Nowgong, but later, with the extension of Ahom suzerainty, his jurisdiction also extended, till it included the entire western part of the kingdom from Kaliabar to Goalpara. He then lived at Gauhati and conducted the political relations with Bengal and Bhutan and the chieftains of the Assam passes. Placed as he was at a distance from the capital, he enjoyed a great amount of executive power and could even inflict death sentence not accompanied by blood-shed. He could nominate and recommend⁴² Rajas as tributary to the king and collect the revenue of those areas in Kamrup which were not included in the territories governed by the tributary Rajas or allotted for religious purposes. He enjoyed the service of 100 attendants and was allotted 1,000 puras of land. Such prerogatives together with wide and autonomous power induced a Barphukan to attempt to acquire suzerain power⁴³.

⁴¹ SAB, p.199.

⁴² AAH, p.71.

⁴³ BVR, p.77.

Local governors and Vassal chiefs:

The princes and the near relatives of the reigning king were appointed as governors in certain areas and they were given the title 'Raja'. Of them, the heir-apparent was usually made the Charing Raja or governor of a tract called Charing. The next in order of succession was the Tipam Raja & Namrup Raja. The frontiers of the kingdom were placed under wardens like Sadiyakhowa Gohain, Marangikhowa Gohain, who were always selected from the families of the three Gohains⁴⁴. The province of Darrang enjoyed complete autonomy in its internal administration; so did the other vassal states like Rani, Beltola, Luki, barduar, Dimarua, Neli and Gobha. All of them, except the Raja of Rani, had to pay an annual tribute⁴⁵. They were bound to furnish the king with the service of a stipulated number of paiks or commutation money instead. In times of war they were to assist their overlord with their contingent of paiks, when called for.

The Ahom kings, therefore, claimed their origin in heaven and not on earth. By following this tradition the Ahom kings were known not by their personal names but by an honorific appellation Chao pha which means (Chao-lord, pha-sky or heaven).⁴⁶ At a later date this title had been translated into Assamese as Swargodeos, with increase in Hindu influence.

⁴⁴ PAB,p.73, DAB, p.129.

⁴⁵ TB XXIX, XXVIII.

⁴⁶ This title has been used by the kings of the Shan states of Burman from early times. Padmeswar Gogol thinks that this is a later development and was primarily due to the orthodox Hindu priests who wanted to associate Ahom kingship with Lord Indra. But the use of Chao-pha by Tai rulers of Burma, China, Lassaprove otherwise.

The Ahom Social System during the early period:

In the initial days of the Ahom period, i.e. till the coming of the Ahoms into the Hindufold, there was no differentiation of caste and class. Socially everybody was given equal status. The families of the 'Patra Mantris" received special status in the society. As discussed earlier these posts were hereditary and decided by birth. All the other Ahoms were given equal status. People used to receive social recognition according to their offices. The paiks of lower ranks used to enjoy lesser social status. When Momai Tamuli was dividing the people into villages, he put people of all ethnicity in one village⁴⁷.

The Ahoms believed in an egalitarian society and did not encourage caste divisions. The concept of clan or *phoid* was very strong with the Ahoms. Members of the same clan were forbidden from getting married. If any such marriages did take place it would bring him down in the social ladder and might even lead his ostracisation from the society.

As we have discussed earlier, the Paiks were broadly classified into two divisions-the Chamua and the Kanri Paiks. The Chamuas were the privileged class, while the Kanri were the non-privileged class. Yet, there was instances of the Kanri paiks climbing up the social ladder by means of his sheer efficiency. If the Swargodeo was pleased by a Kanri paik, he could

⁴⁷ Barua, S.L CHAB p432.

promote him to a Chamua paik. Kirit Chandra Barbarua, the famous councilor of Swargodeo Rajeswar Sinha was said to be promoted from a Kanri paik.⁴⁸

With the introduction the Brahmanical religion, there started arising serious disorders in this social equilibrium. The Ahoms till the early fifteenth century adhered to their indigenous religion. The Ahoms being a part of the Tai culture believed in ancestor worship.

They worshiped traditional gods like the Chomdeo, Lang-kuri or Buragohain.⁴⁹ They held on to their religious beliefs till the introduction of Brahmanism in the Ahom court by Bamuni Raja or Sudangpa (1397-1407). King Suhungmung alias Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) went a step further in welcoming Hinduism by beginning to perform Brahmanical ceremonies and rituals in the royal household. The Ahom age saw a culmination of Saktism in the royal household in the reign of Sutanpha alias Siva Singha (1714-44), son and successor of Rudra Singha.

It was with the introduction of the Brahmanical religion that the medieval Assamese society relatively free from the caste politics, went through serious reorganization.

The appointment of the Brahmans as political advisor by Sudangpha made him pay attention to the demands of the Brahmans. The Brahmans started to demand greater social status, and as it was considered un-Brahmanical to till land, they were exempted from doing so, by paying commutation money. They were therefore made Chamua Paiks. During Siva

⁴⁸ Chakoripheti Buranji, p.72.

⁴⁹ The Ahom Traditional religion discussed in the third chapter.

Singha's region, one certain Krishna Ram Bhattacharya whose initiation was taken by the Swargodeo, revamped Saktism in the royal household with greater vigour. The social status, that was occupied by the three "Dangarias" till now was, shared by the "Rajguru".⁵⁰ The erstwhile egalitarian society now started seeing differences not only among various castes but also among Brahmans. The Brahmans who professed Saktism were now considered to be superior to the other Brahmins viz- the Daivajnas and the Brahmins of the Sattras.

The Ahoms who were pioneers in establishing social equality and had no qualms about marrying Kachari, Chutia or Kalita, but were now apprehensive about marrying a Moamariya Ahom.⁵¹ Brahmins of Upper Assam were forbidden from marrying Brahmins from Lower Assam⁵². There arose difference between the Brahmins of Assam and those of Kanauj. The relations among the Paiks in one *got* was always cordial. In this changed scenario if the Paiks were of different castes, differences were sure to evolve even among them. As, discussed earlier the whole Assamese society was divided between the Brahmans and non-Brahmans, who were collectively called Sudras. The Brahmans were not to have food from the Sudras⁵³.

Even in giving of land grants, favour was shown to the Brahmans. Large grants of land were given to the temples and also a number of paiks were assigned to these temples. These paiks were called the "Dewaliyas". They were exempted from paying certain taxes and from going to wars.

⁵⁰ Krishnaram Bhattacharya was made the Raj-guru.

⁵¹ Regarded to be a lower Ahom and were followers of a sattra called Maomaria Sattra.

⁵² Barbaruah H, Ahomor Din, p.70.

⁵³ Ibid, p.71.

Land grants were also made to Kayasthas, and people of other high castes. The people who were still in their tribal stage of production were brought into the Paik fold. Then by the system of assigning land grants to high officials, temples and later sattras, the Ahom rulers initiated a system of landed hierarchy. As, a fixed number paiks were assigned to a particular grantee, a system of hierarchy was created even outside the caste system.

Even within the caste system, with the increase of Brahmanical influence, the Morias⁵⁴ and Doms were required to shave their heads and even wear a mark of a fish on their foreheads. Even the Muslims were required to shave off their heads.⁵⁵ The people began to strictly adhere to their castes, lest they lose their social position.⁵⁶ Katha Guru Charit further says that the medieval society in Assam was very much a caste ridden society ruled by precepts sanctioned by the Brahman priests.

The Vaishnav movement led by the great Saint Srimantoo Sankardeva in the sixteenth century was a reaction against this prejudices of caste ridden society. The later Ahom period was a witness to a large scale rivalry between the Brahmans and the Gosains⁵⁷ of the Sattras.

The Brahmins who often acted as the advisors to the Ahom rulers often instigated the Swargodeos to persecute the Gosains. Infact this tussle for supremacy led to many turmoils which really shook the Ahom dynasty, which will be discussed in chapter 3.

⁵⁴ Fisherman Community.

⁵⁵ Ahomor Din- S.K. Bhuyan,p.71

⁵⁶ GKC, introduction.

⁵⁷ Religious head of the Vaishnava religious set-up.

Even outside, the caste difference, the Paik system formed by the Ahom rulers was not far behind in creating social inequalities. The higher officials i.e. the Patra Mantris enjoyed certain privileges which the others were deprived of.

Only the higher officials and the Swargodeo could use footwear, others had to move about barefooted. The Dangriyas could travel in palanquins and if the lower classes wished to travel they had to pay a sum of one thousand rupees.⁵⁸

Lower classes could tie a "chadar" around their waist but those higher in hierarchy could hang it from their shoulders. The ordinary people were not entitled to houses made of mortar. Not everyone was allowed to wear 'Japi'⁵⁹ inside the town premises, same was the case of riding horses and wearing jewellery⁶⁰.

The lower classes had to wear their dhoti above their knees. Only the high officials could walk through the royal roads, whereas the lower castes viz-domes, morias and muslims had to walk by the pavements of the streets. Only higher caste Hindus could wear vermilion marks on their foreheads.

Wherever a Kanri paik met a Dangria he had to lower his eyes. So strict was this gradation that a Brahmin of lower status (explained earlier-the

⁵⁸ Ahomer Din – S.K. Bhuyan, p.71.

⁵⁹ A traditional hat.

⁶⁰ Bhuyan, Ahomos Din, p. 72.

Daivanuas) had to sit on the floor in front of a Dangaria even if he was a Kalita.⁶¹

The System Of Giving Land Rights:

Throughout the ancient and medieval times Assam remained a very thinly populated region, because of its difficult terrain, an agriculturally retarded tribal population and its forest and swamps. The extant copper plate land grants and rock inscriptions give us very little about the pre-Ahom land tenure. All such epigraphic records relate only to grants made in favour of Brahman scholars, priests and religious institutions. So, the conditions described in them are certainly not representative of the general pattern of the relevant period.

The Bargaon and Sualkuchi copper plate land grants of Ratnapala as well as the Guwahati grant of Indrapala (eleventh century), the Assam grant of Vallabhadeva (1185 A.D.) and the two North Lakhimpur grants dated A.D. 1392 and 1402⁶² respectively- all establish one important fact. It is the practice of land grants to Brahmans and religious institutions, which was initiated by the Kamrupa king Bhuti Varman⁶³ in the sixth century and continued right up to the Ahom period (1228-1826).

One noticeable feature common to many of these inscriptions is that the royal donor, while giving a piece of wasteland, also gift an inhabited village, or atleast a certain number of peasant families to the same donee. In

⁶¹ SAB- S.K. Bhuyan, p.115.

⁶² Cited in Amalendu Guha's *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*.

⁶³ The Nidhanpur plate of Bhaskarvarman confirmed a land grant by Bhuti Varman.

many grants the donated piece of land is matched with either the donation of an inhabited village or that of a number of persons or both. It is because of the sparsely populated region like Assam, grants of cultivable wastelands were meaningless unless farms labour was also made available. Under such circumstances, the transfer of a village to the donee made it possible for him to exact certain services from the villagers for the development and cultivation of the land concerned.

It was a transfer of the royal rights over a portion of the subject to the grantee. They were probably the slaves or were at least bound to the soil. The practice of giving peasant families also continued during the Ahom age till the early nineteenth century. The persons so donated and settled on the forms were known as bahatia (derived from vasat or habitation) and if slave, as dasa or golam or collectively bandi-beti.

Tradition recorded in early Assamese literature suggests that not only Brahmans, but Kayasthas, Daivajna and other high class migrants were also favored with royal lands grand during the fourteenth, fifteenth centuries. They were known as Bhuyans and they wielded political authority over their respective petty landed estates. As the weak kings of the period could not protect their subjects from the frequent Bhot and Bodo-Kachari incursions, the Bhuyans used to provide the necessary protection. Thus they were not only land lords but also warriors, when ever there was a strong king, they would demonstrate their loyalty through personal attendance in the court. At other times they were almost independent and functioned through a loose confederacy of their own, which was known by the term, Barabhuyan. One of

this powerful Bhuyans, Chandibar Kayastha (fourteenth century) commanded 80 shields. Chandibar's great grandson, the famous Vaisnava saint, Sankardeva inherited and managed a landed estate, which included among other things thirty pairs of bullocks, one hundred and twenty cows.⁶⁴ The Bhuyans of different places were subdued by the Ahoms and were resettled in new areas.

Besides religions and charitable purpose lands were also given to the state officers as assignments in lieu of pay. Beginning from the top cabinet minister- the Bargohain, the Burgohain, the Barpatrogohain, the Barboruah and the Barputhan, a host of offices of both higher and lower ranks in concluding royal favorites and retainers used to receive from the king for their maintenance land assignments and labor allotments.⁶⁵

The three great gohains who were holding power next to the king were in fact, rulers of certain territories of the kingdom known as Bilat or Rajya or Des.⁶⁶ The other official viz-the Barbaruah and Barpukan received land grants as well. The Barbaruah (the chief executive office of the state exercising his power from Sadiya to Kaliakar) Commanded 14, 000 packs and received 1000 yards of rent-free lands from the king.⁶⁷

Among the other recipients of assignment were the royal princes appointed as generals to rule over certain territories of the kingdom known as mel. These generals were called *Meldagia* or *Melkhowaraja*. The other

⁶⁴ Maheswar Neog – Sankardeva and his times.

⁶⁵ A-Mackenzio- The North East Frontier of India.

⁶⁶ Robinson William- A Descriptive Account of Assam

⁶⁷ Ibid.

significant group of assignee were the royal ladies, the queen-mother, the king's grand-mother, step-mothers, sisters, daughters, nurses and daughter-in laws. These ladies received from the king 'Sufficient means for their comfortable maintenance' including large plots of land as grants.⁶⁸ The biggest and most significant estate was that of the chief queen known as Raidangiamel.⁶⁹ Unlike the Khats of the princes and the ministers, the mels could not be enjoyed on hereditary basis.⁷⁰ It must be noted that the system of granting land to the palace ladies was there in the kingdom of Pong in Upper Burma where from the Ahoms left.⁷¹

The other recipients of land assignments were the office lower in the ladder. They were the Baruas, Phukans, Rajkhowa, Hazarika. The rest of the land, including all the prerogatives and the assignments, belonged to the king. He employed a vast number of men to work in his farms gardens, fisheries, mines, arsenals and manufactures, and to man and construct his vessels, who all labor with out any expense to the treasury.⁷²

After looking in to the caste divisions and the social classes the paper on the social stratification would be incomplete if the gender hierarchy is not looked into. The next part of the paper looks in to the position of women in Medieval Assamese Society.

⁶⁸ Jenkins Report, cited in Mills Report p. 638.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Buranji Vivek Ratna.

⁷¹ Cited in U.N. Gohain- Assam under the Ahoms, p. 120.

⁷² Asam Buranji, p. 68.

Status of Women:

Society in north-east India and as such in Assam was by and large tribal in medieval times and that is why contemporary and subsequent observers find that the Assamese women possess great freedom at work and movement.⁷³

Women folk of Assam were comparatively freer than their counterparts in other parts of India in the middle ages. The pardah system was practically unknown. They could move freely and took equal share in planting and harvesting crops with the.⁷⁴

The women of higher caste did not go to the fields but there was no restriction to their movement. There is ample evidence in medieval biographical literature about the participation of women in marketing saleable goods as well as in matters of religious importance. Bhabvanesvari, grand daughter-in-law of Sankardeva, guided the destiny of their respective subjects as religious heads.⁷⁵ Shihab-ud-din –Talish says, 'Wives of the Rajas and peasants alike never veil their faces before anybody and they move about the market places with bare heads.'⁷⁶

The practice of Sati was not much emphasized, during ancient period we find only one stray reference to a concubine who is said to have committed Sati after the death of Bhaskarvarman.⁷⁷

⁷³ Shihabuddin Talish – JBORS, p. 203.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Harideva- carita by Banavara & Divakara.

⁷⁶ JBORS.

⁷⁷ P.C. Chaudhury- The History of the Civilization of the people of Assam- p.234. The Katha Guru Carita mentions Sankardeva's mother performing Sati.

Both child marriage and polygamy were prevalent in the society. A girl was neither permitted to select her own husband nor could she defy the decision of her parents. There were however certain exceptions. Sankardeva asked his daughter Vishnupriya to mix with young Madhabheva so that there might grow mutual understanding between the two and that they might get married.⁷⁸ But this is just one side of the picture. The medieval Assamese society could not escape the attitudes of the contemporary Indian attitude of contempt towards women. Her status in the family or in the society was similar to a Sudra or a non-Aryan to the twice-born Varnas.⁷⁹ Sankardeva, the propagator of the neo- Vaishnavite movement in Assam, was not free from such influences. In many places of his composition he equals women with a Sudra, a Yavana or any people from the law-origin even birds and animals.⁸⁰

Women were regarded as the most immoral class of people in the society. In one of its striking statement the author of the Katha-Guru Charit, for instance records that so long as everything is made available to a wife, she is faithful and good, but as soon as she does not get the desires, she begins to disregard her husband and acts in a way where by the position of her husband is jeopardized.⁸¹

Education was limited to the Brahmanas and equivalent castes. women-education for women and Sudras was disapproved of. The sacred religious works- the Vedas, were never permitted to be touched or read by women and the Sudras. It is to be noted that the Vaishnava reformers

⁷⁸ KGC- p. 90.

⁷⁹ Status of Women in Assam – S.L. Baruah p.9.

⁸⁰ Sharma, Social History p. 48.

⁸¹ Guru charit by Ram Charan Thakur.k.

themselves did not permit women to be initiated as devotee or Bhakat nor allowed them to enter sacred religious institutions like Namghor of Barpeta Satra.⁸²

Women slaves called Bandis or Betis served their masters and whatever they earned belonged to their master. The head of the family had complete right over her and she could be openly bought and sold in the market for prices determined according to her caste.⁸³

While searching⁸⁴ for the reasons as to why women were placed in the lowest ebb of the social hierarchy it may be said that lack of independent base of economy made women helpless and subordinate to man. Indeed devotion to husband or Pati even at the cost of her life was there fore regarded as the most essential qualification of an ideal women. Madhavdeve even advised Sankardeva's wife to address her husband as Gosain or God.⁸⁵

The above discussion shows that, in theory medieval Assam was by its very nature a true representative of the Indian Hindu Society as a whole. This typical Hindu social set-up could not however, be imposed into Assam. Because of it having a non-Aryan background, the society was liberal in many cases. Hence in spite of all derogatory comments on women in ancient, Smriti Karas, and in the some of the statements made by the 16th –17th century Vaishnava reformers of Assam, a balance between the Aryan and that of the non-Aryans, was only natural in this milieu. As a result the overall position of women in the region was some what higher than their counter parts in India

⁸² Even today, women folk are not allowed to enter the Barpeta Satra.

⁸³ Gait- p. 265.

⁸⁴ GKC mentions one instance of giving high honour to a woman Ai Dayal of Koch-Bihar who was appointed potiff and administered vaishnavite faith to king Lakshmi Narayan's (the Kochrulers) harem (Introduction).

⁸⁵ KGC, p.88.

and it is due to the fact that dowry, infanticide, and Sati were absent from Assam.

We, therefore see that the Ahom society which is said to be free from the problems of caste and class was not completely free from it. True the larger set-up of the society was based on a different line, the Paik system, yet the close examination of this system finds stronger trails of the caste stratification as in other parts of India. Yet, one could not fail to observe that, at a societal level that the rigidity of the caste structure as prevalent in other parts of India was substantially absent here.

Nevertheless, the Ahom Swargodos were responsible for creating a status hierarchy. The Paiks, especially the KanriPaiks were always at the receiving end. They were almost tied to the state, and were given away to landlords or temples and Sathras, at the whims of the ruler. They would then have to be at the mercy of their new lords. Of course, they were better than the bonded slaves, as they could buy certain exemptions from personal service by paying a commutation fee of Rs 3/- per annum.

That the Paiks (Kanri) were held in low esteem can be judged from the statement made by Chamua Paiks when addressed as Paiks.... "are we, also Paiks?..."⁸⁶ (Aami kiba Paik neki?)

It was due to the severe restriction attached to the Kanripaiks that we find a large number of paiks got initiated into Vaishnava Sattas as "Bhakats" or disciples as they were exempted from performing personal labor for the state. This in turn gave rise to a new problem, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

⁸⁶ Ahomor Din – S.K. Bhuyan, p.71.

CHAPTER-III

THE AHOM POPULAR CULTURE AND SATTRA CULTURE : CONFLUENCE AND CONTRADICTION

Among the other policies, the religious policy of the Ahoms, form a very interesting chapter of their history. The policies behind the Ahom Swargodeo's acceptance of Hinduism, the subsequent patronage given to Vaishnavism, the persecution of Vaishnava Saints by the later swargodeos, and the chain of events triggered by it, constitutes a very important part of the Ahom history. In, this chapter we shall try to bring out the above mentioned facets and try to look at the debates related to them.

The Ahoms indigenous religion:

The available data does not lead us to any definite conclusion with regard to the major religion of the Ahoms who had ruled the Valley of the Brahmaputra for six centuries. From their religious thought it can be suggested that they were partly Hinayana Buddhists, partly Tantrik Buddhists, partly animists and finally they had their own form of ancestor-worship together with many Gods and spirits. The influence of Tao religious thought is also discernible in the Ahom religion. It is argued that the Tais accepted Buddhism before their advent to Assam and that the Ahoms were in the first stage of Buddhism¹. On the basis of some religious works, Hitesvar Barbarua opines that the Ahoms were Buddhists of the 'creed of non-violence'². P. Gogoi speaks of the Buddhist elements in Ahom rituals but he thinks that

¹ Sarma, Asamiya Sahityar Samikatatmaka Itivritta, p. 284.

² Ahomor Din, p.68.

Ahom religious belief is mainly based on the 'Supernatural Powers', formless spirits or nats invoked with rice, eggs, flowers and sometimes with animal sacrifices but without the icons of gods for the purpose of worship³. Projecting such a proposition, B.J. Terwiel argues that all the available evidence points to the idea that this religion is to be regarded as a branch of the old Tai religion and that no label should suffice to identify it⁴. It is difficult to assign any particular stamp to the Ahoms to any religious system. That the Ahoms were Buddhist arise out of the fact that they performed Phura-lung puja which is largely identified with the Buddhist traditions; while those who deny Buddhism put more emphasis on the celebrations of the religious ceremonies like the Umpha, Saipha, Rikkhawn, Me-Dam-Me-Phi etc.

The worship of the "Somdeo" or Chumpha⁵, said to be an icon of Ahom god, the prerogative of the reigning Ahom kings in an exclusive form appears to be an enigma. In Ahom religious behaviour there is no trace of image worship' at least, no such evidence has come to light so far. Ahom's system of propitiations, oblations to the Gods generally begins with the prayer Cao-phra, Chao-Tra, Chao-Nu-Ru, Chao-Kao-Oil with head high towards the sky and not bowing down before the image of any deity. Therefore, it can reasonably be argued that the whole Chumpha episode is imaginary or in mental plane as per the narratives in the Buranjis. It appears Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and even Hinduism had some influence over Tai religious culture in South-East Asia prior to the advent of the Ahoms to Assam.

³ Barbarua Ahomor Din, p. 389.

⁴ Cited in H.K. Barpujari, The Comprehensive History of Assam, p. 246.

⁵ Is said to be the image of a heron put in a casket.

On their arrival in Upper Assam, the immediate concern of the Ahoms was their problem of defence and means of sustenance and hardly had anything to do with the religion. Scions of the great Tai race, they were well known for their assimilative capacity and were called 'Ahoms'⁶ by the indigenous people. It carried a wider dimension with a deep socio-political significance. Socially, they became one among the local autochthonous groups and politically recognised and legitimized their political supremacy. They identified themselves completely with the indigenous groups because of their adaptability in matters of culture and religion. Martial in character, they were neither religious bigots nor fanatics and a non-bigoted outlook overshadowed their activities throughout the period of their political domination in Assam. The local autochthonous groups with whom the Ahoms came in contact, namely the Morans, the Borahis and the Kacharis, had dominant animistic tribal features. This was in tune with the Ahom's animistic beliefs. It synchronized with their political socializations with identical (connubium) practices. The annual celebrations of the Umpha, Saipha religious functions with sacrifices of animals and the observance of the Rik-khawn, and MeDam-Me-Phi religious celebrations, before and after the victories and defeats in wars, suggest a process of socialization rather than those of a strictly religious, observance.

In spite of their assimilative nature and adaptability, the Ahoms could not forsake in totality the Tai, traits in their religious attitude. Their religious concept is intrinsically linked to their mong concept. The Phi mong is the

⁶ Meaning 'unparalleled'

protecting spirit of the whole state (mong), embracing the Phi-bans, the protecting spirit of each village stretching sometime Phi-huen of each household. But it may be noted that Phi-huen is individual localized while Phi-ban like the Phi-mong has not only included all the inhabitants but also territory including forests, water, domestic animals and the games on land and water. The Ahom thus propitiated, a number of Gods; the Lengdon being the foremost Phi-mong followed by other Gods in hierarchical order. Totally devoid of proselytization, it did not originate from any cult or incarnation; neither it had a preceptor or guru. It was essentially cosmogonic in character which speaks more of the Mystic omnipotent power of the Lord Creator of the Universe on whose benign blessings alone the welfare of the state as well as of its people could be secured.

For the first two hundred years, the Ahoms continued to follow their traditional religion with sacrifices in their religious performances. Socio-political and linguistic exigencies actuated them gradually to lean towards Hinduism. This was not on a mass scale not because of the Hindu religion as such, but in the wake of a plural society which was slowly emerging out of the Ahom conquest, expansions and absorptions. Moreover, the gradual change towards the Hindu religion was more due to certain historical events rather than that of any religious zeal.

The process of Hinduisation existed in north-east India since early times when the Kamrupa rulers patronized a large number of Brahmans. There was a set-back with the disappearance of the kingdom of Kamrupa and in the absence of a strong centralized authority. The process revived in the

Bhuyan chiefdoms and Chutiya kingdom in the east, but slowed down in Upper Assam with the arrival of the Ahoms when Ahomisation also started. The annexation and absorption of the Chutiya kingdom and the Bhuyan principalities followed by the subjugation of the Koches on the West, the Ahomisation gave way to the Hinduisation. The Hindu influence gained ground and accelerated after the consolidation of the Ahom kingdom.

The Brahmanic cult of the Hindu religion was the first to make intrusion in the Ahom royalty during the reign of Sudangpha alias Bamuni Konwar (1398-1407). The prince was born and brought up in a Brahman family and naturally he patronized the Brahmana who looked after him in his childhood. He was the first Ahom king to adopt the coronation rites by ascending the Singanghar. To the existing form, the Brahmanic influence added to its dignity and decorum with elaborate rituals, pomp and grandeur by showering upon benefices to the rank and file and also to the Brahmanas on the occasion. This was significant development in as much as it sought to project the image of the kingship to justify the despotic and absolute nature of the monarchy. This process of Hinduisation went on unabated. Ahom monarchs like Suhummung (Dihingia Raja, 1497-1539), Sushengpha (Pratap Simha, 1603-1641), Sutamla alias Jayadhvaj Simha (1648-1663), increasingly patronized the Hindu religion and by the end of the reign of Sukhrungpha alias Rudra Simha (1696-1714), the kingdom of the Ahoms practically became a Hindu state.

Hinduisation or Aryanisation was a civilizing process with its materialistic tenets of power and pelf. Though the Ahoms were literate with

political experience and had the capacity for surplus production through their advanced technology of wet-rice agriculture, their religio-cultural base was predominantly egalitarian. The Hinduisation process helped this development of political expansion. No wonder, therefore, that the title of the Ahom king the traditional Chao-pha, was replaced by the Aryan Swargadeo which had more connotation befitting the power and image of the rising Ahom sovereign. The Ahom kings had reason to be elated when the Brahmans gratified them by grafting the Hindu myths on Ahom legends and deified the sovereign by attributing a sacred status to him. An image of inviolability of the Ahom king was created by giving him divine descent which was a necessary means at that time to enable the king to resort to more warfare and to extract more surplus to build up the infant state. It also helped in the integration of the cognate clans and the bordering tribes along with the intellectually advanced Hindu population to come under a common flag.

The question of legitimacy and the validity of the dynastic rule of the Ahom kings before the subjects both Hindus and non-Hindus alike was also closely related to this development. The Brahmanical influence added substance to the Divine Right Theory⁷ which brought necessary support to the monarchy without the use of force, threat or coercion. Of course, total consensus or coercion was nowhere possible, but atleast a combination of both representing the degree of legitimacy in relative proportion came to the Ahoms through the adoption of Hindu names and the accompanying rites. Because, initial contradictions were reconciled through a apparent adjustment

⁷ Discussed in the introduction.

with Hindu rigidities for the common and general interest of both the rulers and the ruled.

Thus, the acceptance of Hinduism by the Ahoms was a step toward creating solidarity in a society that was composed of several segments. It was a policy of legitimizing with the native population, which had already come within the Hindu pantheon. Hinduisation was a logical process towards sophistication of the rudimentary formation of the Ahom state. Therefore, the Ahom rulers patronized the Hindu religious preceptors not out of zeal for religion as such, but more as a means to their legitimized consolidation. It was with a view to achieve regional unity and solidarity in the long run.

Surya Kumar Bhuyan opines that the inter-marriage of the Ahoms with the Hinduised tribes of the Chutias and Barahis also helped in the process of the Hinduisation of the Ahoms⁸. Therefore, the Ahoms who initially, followed a policy of non-intervention with the religious beliefs of the local people and maintained in parallel, for all practical purposes, their own beliefs and customs, had to succumb to the local-beliefs and Brahmanical Hinduism.

It all started with the reign of king Sundanpha alias Bamuni Konwar (1397-1407), who was by circumstances born and brought up in a Brahman family.

Sudangpha or Bamuni Konwar, the next Ahom king Sudangpha (1397-1407), better known as Bamuni Konwar, as he was born and brought up in the house of a Brahmana. The Buranjis narrate the history of his birth and his

⁸ Bhuyan, Ahomor Din, p. 70.

eventual accession to the Ahom throne as follows: the Queen Regent of Taokhamthi, who was a barren and a jealous wife, took advantage of the king's absence from the kingdom during the expedition against the Chutiyas and sentenced her co-wife, an expectant mother, to death on charge of an alleged adultery. But the unfortunate victim was secretly spared of her life by the men who were to carry out the orders. They set her adrift on the Brahmaputra, and subsequently, she got shelter in the house of a Brahmana at Habung, where she gave birth to a male child and died immediately after. The Brahmana brought the child up as his own. Meanwhile Taokhamthi was dethroned and assassinated in 1389. As he died without leaving an heir to succeed him, the ministers took charge of the kingdom and started searching out for a prince to be King, because according to the Ahom right of kingship, only the direct descendants of Sukapha on the male line were eligible to sit on the throne. On receiving the information that there was a son by the deceased king born mysteriously in the house of a Brahmana, the ministers sought him out and made him the king. The prince took with him his Brahmana foster-father who was allowed to stay with him in the palace entourage. With the Brahmana came the worship of Lakshmi-Narayana-Salagram, or of God Vishnu-the first official entrance of Hinduism to the Ahom court, which had far-reaching influence in the political and cultural history of the Ahoms⁹. The worship of Vishnu continued along with the Ahom diety Chom-Cheng (Chomdeo). The sons of the Brahman were given princely status and were established at Dihing. This is the first recorded patronage of Hinduism by the Ahom rulers,

⁹ SMAB, p.84.

which subsequently led to their conversion to the faith. Sudangpha's learning towards Hinduism might not have been liked by some of his tribesmen. The Buranjis mention a rebellion of the people of Tipam during the reign of Sudangpha but do not assign any cause.

It seems that the Tipamiyas protested against the pro-Hindu policy of the king and organized a rebellion which was soon crushed. The Tipamiya chief was won over to the king's side, who gave his daughter in marriage to the Ahom king, and the other leaders were treacherously killed¹⁰.

Sudangpha shifted his capital to Charagua near the Dihing. He was the first Ahom king to perform the coronation ceremony, which was called Singari-ghar-utha, as the coronation hall on the occasion had to be constructed with Singari wood. The ceremony was performed according to the Ahom rites but it is possible that his Brahmana foster-father blessed him with Vedic mantras when the king assumed the Hindu titles Maharaja and Rajarajeswar Chakravorty.

King Suhungmung in 1497 assumed the Hindu title Swarganarayan and, as Gait points out, thenceforth the Ahoms used this new designation in their official documents¹¹. He also adopted the Saka era in place of the Ahom system of calculating by cycle of 60 years. It was during his reign that the first Buranji in Assamese entitled Sri Sri Swarganarayan Maharajar Janma Katha was written, in which the Ahoms were assigned the origin from Aryan God Indra, marking thereby another forward step in the process of their conversion

¹⁰ HAG, p. 84.

¹¹ Ibid.

to Hinduism. This compromising attitude of Suhungmung towards the Habungia Brahmas helped him leading an expedition to Habung with the help of the Habungia Brahmans and subjugating the Bhuyans who ruled in Habung¹². King Pratap Singh, is recorded to have sent one Marangiya Khanikar to Koch Behar to learn the art of making earthen images of Durga and since then the goddess was worshipped at the royal temple (Devighar)¹³. Jayadhvaj Sinha (1643-1663) was the first Ahom monarch to accept Hinduism formally from Niranjandeva, who had been installed as the first Vaishnava abbot of Auniati Satra¹⁴. During the reign of Jayadhvaj Sinha to Sulikpha alias Lara Raja (1679-1681), Vaishnavism of the Brahmanical order became the predominant religion in the Ahom court. But with the advent of the Tungkhungia dynasty with Sutapha alias Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696) the attachment shifted to Saktism. He started a policy of persecution of the Vaishnava saints, details of which will be dealt with in the chapter. His son Rudra Sinha (1695-1714) stopped and reversed his fathers policy. He patronized all the three principal sects Vaishnavism, Saivism and Saktism with a clear intention of appeasing them all. Such a policy of Rudra Singha characterized all his catholicity in his religious outlook.

In the process of embracing and patronizing Hinduism, the Ahom rulers used to build temples of Hindu gods and goddesses in different parts of the kingdom. Among them importance was usually given to those of Siva and

¹² DAB,p.124.

¹³ According to Maniram Dewan since the days of Sukapha to Gadadhar Singha annual piya was performed only by Ahom priest Deodhai Baiking. The Durga puja had been started from the time of Suhungmung. Since the days of Rudra Singha both Ahom and Brahmanical forms of Puja were introduced- Asom Buranji obtained from Sukumar Mahanta.

¹⁴ Aauniati Satra Buranji, p. 5.

Durga although temples of Vishnu was also built. Amongst the existing temples of the Ahom age Siva and Durga or Devi¹⁵ temples are found in large numbers. Besides, they worshipped Durga in the Kamakhya temple at Guwahati also, and at the Tamreswri temple at Sadia where they worshipped her in the form of Kachaikhati i.e. eater of the raw –flesh. The Buranjis record that whenever the Ahoms had to fight with tough enemies like the Mughals, they used to offer sacrifices to propitiate the goddess Durga. The legends of the coins of some of the kings mention Siva and Durga as the titular gods and goddesses. Besides, the Ahom kings patronized Hinduism by adopting Saka Era in official purposes, by patronizing the brahmanas and other preachers through donation of revenue-free lands, slaves and servitudes, and by granting economic and other facilities for pursuing study and learning. Towards the later part of the Ahom rule the Brahmana priests and Satradhikaras were made part and parcel of the state policy by making their presence for blessings to the king compulsory on the occasion of a king's coronation ceremony¹⁶.

Thus reasons behind the acceptance of Hinduism by the Ahom rulers were many; times accidental such as the case of Bamuni Konwar, sometimes it was a matter of changing a culture supposed to be inferior to a culture considered as superior; but in most cases it was demanded by political and social circumstances.

¹⁵ The famous Umananda temple in Guwahati built by Gadadhar Singha and Sivadol in Sivasagar by Rudra Singha.

¹⁶ Aniya Devi, Rudra Singha.

A notable aspect of the Ahom religious policy was that in spite of their conversion to Hinduism the rulers did not abandon the traditional beliefs and customs altogether; on the other hand, they practiced these parallel with the Brahmanical rituals and ceremony. For example, at the time of accession to the throne, a ruler used to assume two names: one Ahom and the other Hindu¹⁷. They also use to perform two coronation ceremonies-one according to the Ahom customs called Singarigharatutha Utha, performed by the Ahom Priest called Deodhai and Bailung, and the other performed according the Vedic rites by the Brahman priests¹⁸. They also performed the burials according to their own customs called maidam diya till the last period when it was attempted to be replaced by the Hindu custom of burning the dead since the time of king Rajeswar Singha (1751-69). But in this respect they were not much successful. There are example when in the face of strong opposition from the Ahom priestly class, the dead bodies of kings were either burnt and buried as per maidam system¹⁹. It was thus found that although the Ahom rulers gradually switched over to the Brahmanical Hinduism, their conversion was not complete. But then, against much emphasis given to Hindu religious beliefs and ceremonies no similar importance was attached to the worship of the Tai-Ahom gods and goddesses particularly towards the later part their rule. It is to be noted in this regard, that in Assam there are no remains of any temples worth mentioning built during this period in the names of the Tai Ahom gods and goddesses. This fact shows that the Ahom rulers of Assam

¹⁷ Gogoi L, Tai-Sanskritir Ruprekha, p. 72.

¹⁸ BVR.

¹⁹ Gogoi L, Asomor Sanskriti, p. 118.

continued to carry on their traditional beliefs mainly to show that they were not against the orthodox section of the Ahoms who did not like to see their rulers being converted an alien religion. But the Ahoms till today have maintained the system of traditional marriage the "Chaklang".

The rise of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam:

The great neo-Vaishnava movement of Assam of the 16th century brought about a new and comprehensive outlook on life, a distinctly healthy tone to social behaviour with an all pervasive organizational set-up. The dynasty of individual endeavour of man as a distinct religious being and not as 'the thrall of theological despotism was declared. The use of local language in expositions of theology was in itself a challenge to erstwhile guardians of secret doctrines in Sanskrit which was sealed to the view of the common man.

Mention has been made in early history of Assam that dynasties of Pusyavarman, Salastambha and Brahmapala were Saivites, but Dharmapala seems to have become a Vaishnavite as evidenced by his Puspabhadra grant. The other two kings of the same century, viz. Vaidyadeva and Vallabhadeva were worshippers of Vasudeva²⁰. The Kalika-purana, though a Sakta upapurana, exhibits a catholic outlook by eulogizing Visnu- Vasudeva in many places and the opening *marigalacarana* sloka indicates that the writer was probably of Vaisnava religious faith, for he concludes the work with a salutation to Vishnu. Further, *Sakti* has been mentioned in several places as *visnu-maya*. Vaisnavism prevalent in Assam before the advent of

²⁰ Puspabhadra, Kamuli & Tezpurgrants cited in H.K. Bargujari, p. 229.

Sankaradeva was mainly Vasudevaism affiliated to the *Pancaratra* cult. The *Kalika-Purana* mentions that Hayagriva-Madhava, Matsya-Madhava, Pandunatha-Madhava and Vasudeva and Varaha Madhava were worshipped at different places of Kamarupa²¹. The same Purana prescribes eight syllabled, twelve-syllables and eighteen syllabled *mantras* of the *pancaratras* for the worship of Vasudeva and Hayagriva-Mahadhava. The *Pancaratra* Vasudevaism was a form of tantric Vaisnavism where *mantra*, *yantra* and other tantric procedures were employed. The *Kalika-purana* and *Yoginitantra* have prescribed the *Pancaratra* system of worship for the worship of Hayagriva and Vasudeva²².

That the Vasudeva cult once prevailed in Assam is evidenced by the practice of worship of Vasudeva with Caturvyuhas and Vibhavas in the Smriti rites still prevalent in a section of Brahmanas who follow the earlier and the Kamarupa school for smiti codes in contrast to those introduced by Raghunandana of Bengal. The copper-plate grants dating 1392 and 1401. A.D issued by king Satyanarayana of Lakhimpur district of eastern Assam furnish another evidence of the prevalence of this cult before Sankaradeva²³. The first inscription making a gift of land to one Narayana Dvija begins with invocations to Vasudeva, Isana and Amba. The second grant in favour of Ravideva Dvija describes the Dvija as a devout worshipper of Vasudeva. The forefathers of Gopal Ata living in the Kalita Rajya as mentioned by the Katha-Guru-Carita signify the popularity of the Vasudeva cult in the north-eastern

²¹ Cited in K.L. Baruah, Early History of Kamrup, p. 81.

²² Ibid, p. 57,78,80.

²³ Barpujari H.K, p.229.

region of Assam. The names like Vasudeva, Sankarsana, Kamadeva, Harideva and Aniruddha indirectly points to the prevalence of the Vasudeva cult before the advent of neo- Vaisnavism²⁴. Sankaradeva did not preach the *Pancaratra* cult, but has respectfully mentioned it in his Kirtana and translation of the Bhagavata-Purana, canto XI including the Caturvyuha. In addition to the above the worship of dual form of Hari-Hara appears to be in vogue. Several images of Hari-Hara and Sankara-narayana have been recovered from different parts of Assam preserved in the Assam State Museum.

The monotheistic Bhakti cult which the neo-Vaisnavite reformers brought to the forefront was also not unfamiliar to a section of people. This is evident from the writing of the pre-Sankarite poets like Hemasarasvati, Harihar-Vipra, Madhava Kandali and Kaviatna Sarasvati who flourished in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries of the Christian era. The verse-translation of the entire Valmiki-Ramayan with a Vaisnavite stamp by Madhava Kandali in the middle of the fourteenth century and adaptation of a few episodes of the Mahabharata in to narrative kavya by the pre-Sankarite poets prescribing devotion as the only way of releasing oneself from the bondage of the world, bear testimony to the existence of a current, though thin, of devotional Vaisnavism in Assam between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries of the Christian era.

Several Sanskrit scholars specialized knowledge in the Kyaya and Smiti works flourished in Kamarupa between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries, who clearly established a separate school of *smitinibandhas*. These

²⁴ U.C. Lekharn ed KGC

nibandhakaras, viz. *Vedacarya* (c. 13th century). *Kavibharati* (c. 13th), Damodara Misra (c.15th century), Nilambaracarya (14th century) and Pitambara Siddhanta-Vagisa (16th) have discussed some Vaisnavite rites and rituals in the nibandhas. Almost all of them were Vaisnavites by religious creed. The *Svalpamatsya* purana, supposed to be a work of a Kamarupi scholar, has elaborately discussed in a section the Vaisnavite rites and rituals²⁵.

The highly ritualistic and priest-ridden religious rites of Brahmanical religion were considered unsuitable for the majority of the people who belonged to the non-Aryan ethnic groups with little or no knowledge of Sanskrit language in which Brahmanical rites and ritual were conducted. At this juncture Sankaradeva was born in 1449 A.D. In the Siromany Bhuyan family at Alipukhuri (Bordowa) who ushered in the neo- Vaisnavite movement in Assam and Koch Behar²⁶. "The earlier biographers of his life and religious activities Ramcarana and Daityari Thakur have not referred to the date or year of his birth although both of them have recorded the date and year of his demise and Saka 1490 (1568 A.D.)²⁷. It is only later biographies of the eighteenth century that have recorded the year of his birth which cannot be accepted without reservations. That is why Gait in his history of Assam says that his birth is possibly thirty or forty years too early. A close perusal of the internal evidence furnished by the later biographers leave some scope to doubt the authenticity of the earlier date, i.e. 1449 A.D. , but there is scarcely

²⁵ Manoranjan Shastri, *Asamar Vaisnava Darsanar Ruprekha*.

²⁶ Neog, *Sankardeva & His times*, 98-122.

²⁷ Barpujari, p. 231.

any doubt about the year of his death²⁸. Sankardev came out of the Sankrit *tol* (residential Sanskrit school) of Mahendra Kandali as an erudite scholar in all branches of Sanskrit learning. He settled himself as a house holder, but his wife died immediately after the birth of her daughter leaving no other issue. As regards his age, the Vaisnavite tradition has unreservedly accepted that he lived for 120 years being a *Mahapurusa*. Considering his robust health, regulated and disciplined life and balanced mental disposition is not unlikely that he might have lived for nearly 120 years. After the death of his wife and marriage of his daughter, he set out for pilgrimages throughout the length and breadth of India for twelve years in course of which he must have met many saintly and scholarly persons²⁹. It is likely that he had witnessed neo-Vaisnavite movements led by his predecessors in different regions of India like Madhavacharya, Nilambaracarya, Visnusvami-Vallabhacarya, Ramananda and Kabir. Sarikaradeva's reference to the popularity of Kavir's dohas in place like Puri and Varanasi in his Kirtana Ghosa bespeak of his contact with the religious movements that were gaining ground in that age. It is not unlikely that Sankaradev might have received spiritual initiation from some Vaisnava saint at Puri where he spend more than a year. Curiously enough, he has maintained complete silence about the identity of his spiritual guide, although he has not failed to pay obeisance to his guru in the opening lines of some of his poetical compositions.

After his return from his long pilgrimage and having obtained copy of the Bhagavata-Purana with Sridhara Swamis commentary through Jagadis'a

²⁸ Gait, p.85.

²⁹ KGC, p. 29-33.

Misra of Tirhut, Sankardeva engaged himself seriously in the task of propagating the new faith based on the Bhagavat Purana and the Gita and succeeded in procuring a band of followers with whose help he constructed a deva grha (prayer hall) where prayers composed by him, recitations from the Bhagavata and religious discussion were regularly held³⁰.

The new faith and movement did not take a definite shape till the receipt of the Bhagavata Purana with the Sridhara's commentary. The possession of the copy gave a clear and definite shape not only to his Bhagavatism but also enable him to render the original texts into lucid and melodious verses. The cult is reinforced by the teaching of the Gita which enjoins complete self surrender to God. It was announced by the reformer that a true Vaishnava should not enter any temple other than Visnu nor should he partake of the offering made to any other deity. The movement was well received in his native place at Bardowa but the Bhuyans, to which clan Sarikaradeva belonged, had to imgrate to the north bank of the Brahmaputra to avoid frequent clashes with the Kacharis, a Mongoloid tribe. They temporarily settled at Rowta and thence to Gagamukh or Ahataguri in eastern Assam. Finally they migrated to the Dhuahata-Belaguri within the Ahom territory. The simplicity and purity of the new faith in contrast to the ritual dominated Brahmarnical cult was the prime factor in attracting unsophisticated masses to the devotional path. The portal of this new faith was kept wide open to all communities and no discrimination whatever was

³⁰ Sankardeva, p. 125.

made on the basis of castes and status while conferring initiation or ordination.

The most important achievement of Sankara at Belaguri was the acquisition of Madhavadeva to his fold who after his conversion from the Sakta faith proved himself the ablest and the most faith full disciple. Madhava's unflinching devotion to God and deep allegiance to his guru, ultimately prompted Sankaradeva to nominate him as his successor as the head of the Vaisnavite community. Having stayed at Dhuwahata-Belaguri peacefully for nearly fifteen years, the Bhuyans headed by Sankara shifted to Kamarupa due to the hostile attitude of the Ahoms who had killed his son-in-law Hari Bhuuyan for his supposed negligence to western Assam then under the Koch rule and having settled temporarily at various territory in 1546 the Bhuyans and some of the followers of Sankara migrated to western Assam under the Koch rule and having settled temporarily at various places, Sankar established himself permanently at Patbausi near Barpeta along with his followers.

The third phase of Sankaradeva's life commenced with his entry into the Koch kingdom. Here, in Kamarupa, Narayan Thakur, wealthy, resourceful and devoted disciple, was initiated and the latter was instrumental in bringing a large number of followers to his guru and thereby augmenting material resource of his religious establishment³¹. At Patbausi, the prayer hall (*namghar*) shrine (*manikuta*), having been constructed, regular teachings were made from the Bhagavata and Gita and dramatic performances were

³¹ KGC.

regularly held which attracted a large number of adherents to the devotional fold. After a few years, accompanied by 120 followers the saint went on his second pilgrimage to Puri. On his return he visited the math of Kabir at Baliya where he met his grand-daughter.

Three Brahman scholars, viz. Harideva, Damodardeva and Ananta Kandali came forward at this time to join his movement. It is difficult to say in the face of contradictory statements of biographies (*carita*) whether these three influential saints and scholars were initiated by Sankaradeva. Doubtless, they helped him in spreading and popularizing the neo-Vaisnavite movement. The co-operation of Damodaradeva and Harideva, enabled the saint to extend the sphere of his activities to the Brahmanical section which had been averse so long to the movement. Even then, there was no dearth of people who brought allegations against the saint-poet Sankaradeva in the court of the Koch king Naranarayana (1540-85) that he was preaching and propagating a faith contrary to the traditional Hindu religion³². The king ordered his arrest, but the timely intervention of Sukladhvaja, who married a niece of Sankara, enabled the latter to escape and appear in the royal court to prove that the creed of devotion preached by him was sanctioned by the Vaisnava Puranas and the Gita. Highly impressed with his saintly behavior, profound learning and dignified personality the king rewarded Sankara with rich presents and assured him safety in the free propagation of the new creed³³.

³² Sarma Neo-Vaisnavism & Sattras Institution of Assam, p. 100-118.

³³ KGC.

Tenets and Practices of faith:

The Bhagavata-purana, the Bhavagad-gita and the Sahasra-nama section of the Padma-purana are popularly considered to be the authorities from which Sankaradeva accepted the main articles of this faith, namely, *satsamga* (the assembly of bhaktas as a means of bhakti), Ekasarana (shelter in one God, Visnu-Krisna, alone), and *nama* (Kirtana, or prayer, as the main form of devotion). While the Bhagavata-Purana and the Bhagavad Gita, and other Vaishnava puranas and texts also have been adapted into Assamese or cited as authorities by the Vaisnava writers, the writings of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva and a few other works approved by them or the order provide the gospel and have a canonical authority. The Bhagavata-Purana and the Bhagavad Gita alone among Sanskrit works are used in the ceremonial readings. In the explanation of these two books, the Bhagavata-bhavartha-dipika and the 'Subodihini commentaries of Sridhara-svami have been used from the beginning with such slight modifications as may be found necessary to suit the peculiar tenets of the faith.

Sanakaradeva's creed is popularly known as mahapurusiya dharma, the word 'mahapurusiya, being an imitation of Skt. 'mahapaurusika'³⁴. explained as mahapuruso visnus tadiya mahapaurusika vaikunthanathanucarah by Sirdhara³⁵; explained as mahapuruso visnus tadiyah by Sridhara, and rendered as mahapurisar sevaka by

³⁴ Bhag. 114.37

³⁵ Bhag, 1.1.10.

Madhavadeva³⁶. Meaning that the worshipful is the transcendent Visnu, the controller of prakrit and purusa³⁷ and known as Brahman, paramatman and bhagavat³⁸.

The official name of the Bhakti creed of Sankaradeva is *Ekasarana namadharma* and this explains its cardinal principles, which enjoin the worship of one God, that is, Visnu, especially in the incarnation of Krsna, and indicates its main form, which consists of the utterance of the holy names of the God in the singing of songs in his glorification. The words of the Lord in school of Ramanuja in the Bhagavadgita, demanding unswerving devotion to him³⁹ are to be remembered. Bhattadeva a Brahman author, cites relevant authorities to say that a votary should not take offerings to the five gods in pancayajna, for that would vitiate his *Ekasarana*, but make offerings to Visnu alone, and that would bring satisfaction to all the gods⁴⁰, the bhakta is not to cast either adoring or hateful glances on the idols of other gods; nor should he visit places of their worship⁴¹. No hostility, however, is to be exhibited by him towards the adherents of other creeds while engaging himself in the worship of Visnu, who alone is considered as being Suddha –sattava, of pure existence⁴². It is, moreover, a religion of implicit love and faith, bhakti; and love in order to be true to itself and its object must be avyabhacarinai; chaste even as a chaste wife; it must not have behind it the idea of securing a return,

³⁶ Namaghosa, 650.

³⁷ Prakriti purasa durio niyanta madhava. Namaghosa, 405.

³⁸ Namaghosa, 176; Bhag. P. 1.2.11.

³⁹ sarvadarman parityajya mam ekam saranam vraja, 18.66.

⁴⁰ Bhag, p. 4.31.14.

⁴¹ Sankaradeva, Bhag, p. 2.

⁴² Narayanakalah santa bhajanti hy anasuyavah, Bhag. O. 1.2.26.

not even the highest beautiful (*ahaituky avyavahita ya bhaktih purusottame*⁴³. The ideal bhakta is, therefore, no aspirant to the release of his soul (*muktito nisprha*).

There are nine modes of bhakti (*sravana, kirtana, simarana, pada-sevana, arena, vandana, dasya, sakhya, atmanivedana*). Of these the Assam Vaisnavas considered *sravana* and *kirtanna* to be sufficient as the religious endeavour of man towards the highest consummation possible. They are accessible to the highest and the lowest alike, and no rigid theocratic laws are to be followed by the votary; and much of the vagaries of form and formality is also reduced to the minimum. A novice (*prakṛta bhakta*) may, if he likes, worship Visnu-Kṛṣṇa in an image, for arcane is admitted as one of the nine modes of bhakti; but his ardent bhakta, whose company is to be sought by all means. One who spurns the bhakta and goes to seek salvation from an idol is 'worse than a bull'⁴⁴. The Lord, Moreover, has no other image than the World⁴⁵. The ideal bhakta, therefore, worship the Lord within with but what his hear can offer⁴⁶. Like a mystic, Sankaradeva realized that God lived broadcast in the general hearts of all creatures, and it is only when we know this truth that we go to seek him outside⁴⁷. Idol worship does not play any important part in Sankaradeva's system; and this small bit of ritualism can also be done away with if the devotee wishes. The activities in the *satras* consist of prayer services, divided into a day-long programme of three to fourteen parts, each

⁴³ Bhag. P. 3.29.12.

⁴⁴ Sankaradeva, *Kirtana ghosa* 3.61; Bhag p. 10.48.13.

⁴⁵ *Mantramurtim amurtikam*, Bhag, p. 1.5.38.

⁴⁶ Sankaradeva *Bhakti ratnakura* 9, citing Bhag, p. 11.27.15.

⁴⁷ *Kirtana ghosa*. 8.11.

called to *prasanga* or *nama-prasanga*. These are held in the congregation hall (*kirtana graha, namghar*), where the object of veneration is the *guru-asana*, with some works of the master in ancient folios. And this is how namadharmā is performed. The secret formula confided by the superior to the novice at the time of initiation into Bhakti consists of four names of the Lord; and *bhakta*, the intimate fraternity in whose company to seek out the Lord of Love. Of the different attitude of Bhakti Sankaradeva advocated *dasya*, or servitude, the servant and God as the master; and the servant is to know none other than God as claiming his all out devotion. The Radha-Kṛṣṇa cult is not acknowledged in this system of Vaiṣṇavism, nor is any Sakti of Viṣṇu to be recognized in his worship.

Sankaradeva was a sudra, but accepted brahmans as his disciples, who made such obeisance to him as spiritual guru was due to receive. This was one of his actions that could not be approved by the orthodox supporters of casteism and Sankaradeva had to render an explanation in the Koch court. Damodaradeva also was taken to book for accepting a sudra's religion. The explanation offered was that a sudra might be debarred from rendering vedic mantras to other people, but is free to give nama-mantra to any person. In Sankaradeva's system, therefore, we find Brahman disciples of sudra teachers and even people who are untouchables in other parts of India in the following of a sattra. No body, on the other hand, was to be considered as unfit for securing initiation into the cult on caste considerations. Among the disciples of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva were Candśai and Jayahari, both Musalamans; Bovinda, a Garo; Jayananada, a bhutiya; Madhava of Jayanti

of the Hira or potters profession; Srirama, believed to have been a kaivarta; and Damodara, a baniya. A later superior, Sriramadeva, administered ordination to some Nagas, Ahoms, Koces, Miris (missing), Kacharis, Marans and people of many other tribes were also freely converted to the Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva's order. It is the catholic outlook of this religion that could thus unify different peoples into one spiritual fraternity, and also achieve a cultural synthesis.

Sankaradeva was a house-holder, and Madhavadeva lived a life of celibacy. One need not forsake the world, they taught, to find God. It was probably the ideal of Madhavadeva's individual life that brought into being an order of ascetics (kevaliya), who formed the innermost circle within the satras. But there could be married persons as well as monks in those establishments as divines or ordinary residents. There was no order of nuns, and women in general are not allowed to mix with the men in congregations. There were, of course, instances of women holding the position of Superiors. Sankaradeva's grand-daughter-in-law. Kanakalata made a definite contribution to the growth of the satra system when she organized the vardowa group therein and on her own appointed twelve deputies, all men of course, as heads of satras⁴⁸.

Social reorganization:

Sankaradeva did not, or could not, do away with caste divisions. But the Bhakti movement did tone down much of the stigma attached to such

⁴⁸ Neog, Sankaradeva.. p.180.

discriminations. In the Vaisnava congregation all members of the fraternity were equal. The prayer services and the reading of sacred texts could be conducted by persons able to do it, irrespective of their social standing in the old scale. The offerings to the deity could be distributed in the assembly by men of any caste within the circle of bhaktas. Notwithstanding persecution from the old orthodoxy, people flocked to Sankaradeva's side to listen to the message of love, and met there as equal sons of God.

Sanakaradeva thus effected a great change and cleansing of hearts. He also taught people personal cleanliness and correct social behaviour. Ever since the day of receiving ordination, the life of a bhakta becomes a life of dedication. Along with the initiation he was taught the ways of a clean life, inward and outward, in minute details, to which he had to adhere with the greatest possible care. General *sadacara* or good conduct was for the most part outward *sauca-suddhi*, maintained by an ample use of water; and an initiate was always to be distinguished by his behaviour in this regard. Though cleansing of the body before the meals was an indispensable part of the bhakta's daily routine. When a person was received into the faith, he had to give up old unclean ways, the taking of intoxicants, the keeping of unclean animals and birds, the cultivation of poppy or opium, the monks as well as lay disciples could take fish and venison. The great teacher that Sankaradeva was, held an ideal of balanced life, not of indulgence and license, but, at the same time, not a renunciation and self- mortification.

The sattras plays a great role in the social life of the people, and as a social force, this institution was greatly strengthened by the acceptance of the

Vaisnava faith by the Ahom kings and nobles. The popular saying, "rajar khajana gurur kar", rent for the lands to the king, and holy tax to the guru's (in a sattrā); indicates how conscious people were of this double allegiance binding people's life. The spiritual obligation gave people a dignity, a balanced view of life and an attention for details, and made them God-fearing and moral beings. The acceptance of the faith indicated to them that others were to be treated as equals rather than as victims of social stratification. In Assam toleration became the rule rather than the exception.

With the organization of sattras came their decentralized replica, the institution of village *namghar*, something like the parish church. From the beginning the *namghar* formed the hub of all village activities. It was the village club and theatre. It exercised a close spiritual control over all members of the community, and held them back from many an evil act. In fact, this institution might be called the village parliament, and a parliament run too on broad democratic principle. It was the village court & trials of disputes and petty crimes were held in it, and no one dared disregard the judgment pronounced by the elders of the village. An excommunication could be decreed by this village panchayat, and was the worst thing that a man in society could dread in those days. Only difficult cases were referred to the superior of the sattrā to which the delinquent belonged, or to the government judiciary. Thus through the twin institutions of sattrā and *namghar* Assamese society was neatly organized; and the moral tone of the people with such vigilance all around was bound to be very fine indeed.

The Sattra Institution of Assam:

The sattras resembled to a certain extent the Vaisnavite mathas and *akharas* of other parts of India. Each *sattra* consisted of three principal parties or categories of persons intimately connected with the welfare and management of the sattra. These parties were – (1) *sattradhikara*, (2) *bhakats*, (3) *sisyas*. The first two parties generally resided within the four walls of the sattra campus, while the last party lived in scattered villages leading the ordinary life of a house-holder. The head of a sattra was popularly known as *adhikara*. His position was similar to that of the *mohunt* of the *matha* institution or the abbot of the Christian monasteries. He was the religious head and spiritual guide of the flock under his care. He initiated disciples and conducted all important religious functions. The second party, viz., *bhakats*, consisted of those devotees who either hold ecclesiastical office under the sattra, or led an intensely devotional life within the campus of the sattra, observing celibacy throughout their life. In purely monastic sattras where celibacy was strictly observed, the number of such *bhakats* or celibates were more numerous than those of the semi-monastic or non-monastic sattras. Such celibate devotees were popularly called *kevaliya bhakat*. The word *kevaliya* was derived from Sanskrit *kevala*, i.e. lone or unattached. These celibates were recruited in their teens by elderly celibates and under the guidance of the latter, they remain as apprentices for a few years to learn the manners customs as well as the religious secrets of cult/ The lay devotees or disciples of sattra were called *sisya*. Every Assamese Vaisnava family

was invariably affiliated to one or the other of the five hundred and odd *sattras* of Ahoms⁴⁹.

Structural Features:

The structural pattern of a *sattra* was marked by the existence of a *namghar*, a *manikut*, a *karapat* and two to four rows of *hatis*. The centre of all irreligious activities of a *sattra* was the *namghar*. It is a long open hall with gabled roof and apsidal façade. It serves as a prayer hall as well as the seat of all meetings and discussions. The actual shrine where the image of the deity and the sacred scriptures were kept was called *manikut*. It is comparatively a smaller structure adjoined to the eastern or southern end of the prayer hall (*namghar*). The prayer hall and the shrine are modeled on the structural pattern of a Hindu temple which consisted of a *garbha-griha* containing the image and a *mandapa* hall. The *namghar* with its apsidal façade and the *manikut* attached to it exactly resemble the main temple of Kamakhya with a similar apsidal *mandapa* hall adjoined to the main shrine. On the sides of the *sattra* campus stood four rows of huts known as *hati* where *bhakats* of various categories reside. In *sattras* of monastic type where only celibates were allowed to reside, the *hatis* were entirely inhabited by celibate devotees, but where celibacy was not strictly enforced, one or more sides of the campus was reserved for married devotees. In most of the existing *sattras*, however, the system of constructing *hatis* was not strictly enforced. The entrance leading to the interior of a *sattra* was usually marked

⁴⁹ GKC- Intro.

by a small open house known as Karapat (Sk-kapata). Distinguished guests were first received at karapat and then, they were escorted to the interior⁵⁰.

The following description of the Garmur Sattrā, as given in the District Gazetteer of Sibsagar, 1905, may be cited as a representative description of a monastic sattrā in Assam.

"The buildings of the sattrā are approached by a good road which is constructed at some expense. The namghar is a huge structure, the roof of which is supported on huge wooden pillars and the great floor-space is entirely bare save for one or two lecturns on which the sacred writings are reposing. The actual shrine is a separate building closely adjoining the eastern end of the namghar. The shrine is very different from the penetralia of the sakta temple. There is no trace of blood or grease; there is nothing disgusting or grotesque and the whole place is dominated by the note of decency and propriety which is so marked a characteristic of Vaisnavism of Majuli. In a square round the gardens stand the lines of huts in which the resident monks live. They consist of well-built rows of rooms which are much more spacious than those ordinarily occupied by village folk and are kept scrupulously clean. There is singularly gracious and pleasing in the whole atmosphere. Everything is fresh, neat and well-to-do. The well groomed smiling monks are evidently at peace with themselves and with the world at large. The children are recruited from villages and trained to be devotees, but if at any time they find the restraint of celibacy irksome, they are at liberty to return to the outer world".

⁵⁰ KGC.

Use of the word sattra:

The term sattra is a Sankrit word where it is used in two senses; firstly in the sense of an alms-house or charitable institution and secondly in the sense of a sacrificial session lasting for several days or more. The latter sense was responsible in lending the nomenclature to the Vaisnavite institution of Assam. It has been stated in the opening chapter of the Bhagavata-purana that during the course of a sacrificial session at the forest of Nimisa, Suta-Ugrasrava expounded the above Purana to the assembly of sages. The fact that a sacrifice called sattra proceeded concurrently with the act of expounding the Bhagavata easily led people to think that sattra and an assembly of devotees listening to the exposition of the Bhagavata are identical. Sankaradeva probably initiated the Vaisnava movement by reciting and expounding the stories of the Bhagavat Purana to a band of followers who clustered around him to listen to his religious discourses. The part played by Sankaradeva probably reminded the listeners of the part played by Suta-Ugrasrava in the assembly of holy sages. Under the above erroneous impression devotees began to term an assemble of devotees where the Bhargavata used to be read and discussed as a sattra, even though the word actually meant a sitting or a session (O sad= to sit + tra) or an instrument which liberates the good (sat=good, + O trai=to liberate) must have supplied additional reason for forming the above notion. The Sanskrit word sattra very naturally became sattra in Assamese.

Stages of evolution:

The first stage of the growth of the sattrā institution began with Sankaradeva. But during his life time the religious association organized by him had not taken the shape of a regular institution of a permanent nature. Sankaradeva, no doubt, laid the foundation of the institution, but the superstructure was raised during the succeeding generations. It was Madhavadeva who succeeded Damodaradeva, that saw the sattrā institution approached the second phase of its development. There are definite references in medieval biographies of saints to the part played by Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva in giving a definite shape to the structural as well as organizational side of the sattrā institution. Madhavadeva, besides reconstructing the Barpeta sattrā on a permanent basis, systematically divided the prayer services in to fourteen units and made necessary arrangement for the smooth running of the sattrā⁵¹. Simultaneously, Damodaradeva also systematized the management of his sattrā by allotting definite function to different individuals and arranged and definitely fixed the procedure of religious service to be conducted daily in his sattrā⁵². The sattrā institution took a definite monastic turn in the hands of Vamsigopaladeva who introduced some changes in his Kalabari sattrā in eastern Assam towards the third decade of the seventeenth century. His sattrā at Kuruwabahi, established later, provided rooms for five hundred celibate devotees⁵³. The final phase of the growth of the sattrā institution was reached with the

⁵¹ Caritpathies.

⁵² Barpeta Sattrā, by Diganto Das in Journal for Assam Research Society, Vol. XII, 1974.

⁵³ Mahanta, Asomor sattrā Parisoy, p.17.

extension of royal patronage to all important sattras. The successive Ahom kings placed at the disposal of different sattras certain number of persons to act as paiks (persons engaged to render definite service) and grant lands free of any charge. This act of royal patronage placed many sattras on a sound economic footing. But, to look in to the affairs of sattras and to keep the court well informed of situations at different sattras, an officer known as Sattriya Barua was appointed. Thus, some sort of contact developed between the royal court and the sattras.

Functions of sattras:

Functions of the sattra institution may be classified into two categories, viz., primary and secondary. Its primary functions were to propagate Vaisnavism based on monotheistic principle: to initiate disciples; to provide ethico-devotional codes and rules of conduct for the neophytes and to hold religious festivals on different occasions. Sattras were acting more or less as the guardians of religion and morality by keeping close vigilance over their disciples. By maintaining regular agents at different localities and by personal visits, the heads of sattras tried to elevate the spiritual and moral standard of the villagers. The secondary functions of the sattras were to see that good social relations were maintained amongst the villagers, to develop the spirit of co-operation, to provide adequate facilities for the dissemination of ancient learning and to dispense justice on all social and religious controversies.

Before the introduction of the British system of administering justice, sattras tried many cases relating to social matters⁵⁴.

Management and Income:

The present income of sattras was mainly derived from two sources. These two sources were, (1) income from lands originally granted by the kings; (2) income from religious tithes contributed by disciples. Besides the above two sources, occasional donations and subscriptions from disciples and devotees constitute a main source of income. All important sattras possessed in varying degrees land-grants ranging from a few acres to several thousand acres of land, some of which were completely free of revenue charges. The second source yields income according to number of disciples and followers. Every disciple was expected to make a small contribution annually in cash or kind to his sattra⁵⁵. The demand was small enough and did not generally exceed a rupee in cash or a few seers of rice or some wearing apparel. Formerly, the payment of guru-kar(tithe) was considered as indispensable as the payment of government revenue, though there was no legal obligation to pay that sum.

For the efficient management of the sattra and for conducting religious services regularly the head of a sattra, in consultation with the senior devotees, appointed from among his disciples, functionaries to manage different departments of the sattra. These were several gradations of such functionaries, who according to status or rank, exercise control over their

⁵⁴ Neog, Sankardeva...

⁵⁵ Mahanta, Majuli,p.5.

respective departments, contacts between disciples, functionaries to manage different department of the sattra. There were several gradations of such functionaries, who according to status or rank, exercise control over their respective department. Contacts between disciples of far-flung villages and the sattra was maintained through a set of functionaries were usually nominated by the head, but in some sattras they were selected on the basis of election.

Ownership and Property:

There were three form of ownership; (1) ownership vested on the chief idol of the deity of the sattra; (2) ownership vested on the community of devotees; and (3) family ownership⁵⁶. In the first case, the sattra theoretically belonged to the idol of the deity, to whom the entire property of the sattra is dedicated. In the second case the ownership of a sattra was in some cases collectively vested on the community of devotees with the satriya or the adhikar as the nominal head. The third type of ownership was prevalent in most of the sattras where the headship devolves on hereditary principle and the sattra was managed by a particularly family. The head in the first type of ownership was a trustee of the sattra property in the name of the image of the deity. The powers exercised by the head of such a sattra was mostly determined by long-standing customs and practices. In the second type of ownership, the power of the head is very much limited⁵⁷.

⁵⁶ Bardowa & Barpeta Satra, Buranji.

⁵⁷ Aauniati Satra Buranji.

Contributions of Sattra:

One of the most notable social contributions of the sattra institutions was the upliftment of the backward classes. The so-called untouchables and backward classes were freely taken into the fold of Vaisnavism. Though inter-dining and inter marriage between different castes were not prescribed, yet the spiritual bond and fellow feeling fostered by sattras reduced to a considerable extent the rigour of caste distinction. Another notable social contribution of the institution was its services amongst some of the tribes of Assam. Non-Aryan tribes like the Koch, the Moran, the Chutiya, the Ahom and the Kachari were brought under the fold of Vaisnavism and Vaisnavism and Vaisnavite missionary activities were also conducted amongst tribes like the Mising, the Naga, and the Aitoniya. In Sankaradeva's translation of Book II of the Bhagavata Purana, we find a significant stanza wherein the tribes of Assam have been mentioned as attaining liberation under the Mayamara sub sect. The sattra, affiliated to the Kala samhati branch of Assamese Vaisnavism, notably Dighing, Ceca, Budbari, Bareghar and Katanipar, deserve special mention for their missionary activities amongst the backward and tribal people.

The sattra institution contributed considerably to the spread of learning and education in medieval Assam. All principal sattras used to maintain Sanskrit *to/s* and service of reputed scholars were requisitioned to run those *to/s*. Sattra was a religious centre, a school, and a library also. Not only existing books were preserved with care, books were also imported from other

places of India the books were not left to lie fallow⁵⁸. They were industriously and assiduously copied when they were worn out one were replaced by new copies. Devotional lyrics, dramas and religious kavyas were composed and dramatic performance were regularly held to the delight of the masses⁵⁹. It became a customary practice with every sattradhikar to perform a play, composed by himself, to mark his accession to the religious headship of the sattra⁶⁰. Biographies of saints (*carit-puthis*) and sattra chronicles (*sattra-vamsawali*) were also important contributions of sattras. It is entirely religious in outlook and motive. The art of wood and ivory carving was practiced in some sattras. Figures of deities and hideous masks were carved out of wood and little doll like figures of gods and goddesses were beautifully carved out of ivory by artisans of some sattra. The art of book illustration by decorating them with miniature was scrupulously cultivated by unknown painters living with in the religious atmosphere of certain sattras. The epics and the puranas were generally illustrated and pictures are available in all combination of colours. The artist were more concerned with the narratives than with the exhibition of his accomplishment. Mere technical skills was held in reserve in subordination to the narrative flow of pictures. In short, the cultural history of Assam in respect of fine arts and crafts, of education and learning, since the beginning of the sixteenth century till the advent pf the British, largely developed centering round the Vaisnava movement which in turn found expression through the sattra institution.

⁵⁸ Neog Maheswar, Sankardeva..

⁵⁹ Sarma Diganto in Itihakhe Suwara Rangpur, p.41.

⁶⁰ GCK

Sub-sects of Mahapurushiya Cult:

The four sub-sects or Samhatis of the Mahapurushiya cult came to exist after the death of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. Damodaradeva and Harideva seceded from the orthodox cult and formed a separate sub-sect called Brahma Samhati, where Brahmanical elements predominated⁶¹. The Gosains of this Samhati, who were all Brahmanas used to offer initiation to the kings. As a result, the Ahom kings, who accepted the Vaisnava cult, selected their spiritual guides from amongst the Gosains of this Samhari. The four leading Satras of this Samhati were Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garamur or Kuruabari. These four Satras were popularly called Bamunia Satras and Chari Satras⁶².

Twelve Sattras were established under the authority of Sankaradeva's grandson Purushottam Thakur. These twelve Satras were called Bar Baregharia Satras. Another twelve Satras were established by another grandson of Sankaradeva, which came to be known as Saru Baregharia Satras. These twenty four satras all together formed the Purusha Samhati. They were so called because they were founded by preachers belonging to Sankaradeva's direct line or Purusha. This Samhati laid special emphasis on Nama⁶³.

Twelve Satras were established by Gopaldeva of Bhyabanipur in eastern Assam, six presided by Sudra and six by Brahmana pontiffs formed the Kala-Samahati. The term derived its origin from Kaljar, the headquarters

⁶¹ GCK.

⁶² Bhattacharjee, Asomor Satra Parichay, p.7.

⁶³ Ibid,p.25.

of Gopaldeva. Of the six Satras presided by Sudra pontiffs, those of Dihing and Mayamara were the most important⁶⁴. The Kala-Samhati gave the Guru, a supreme position who was considered as God in human form. They were more egalitarian in their outlook and more liberal in the matters of caste. A Brahmana, simply because of his birth, did not receive a higher position or status in their sectarian assemblies than a non-Brahmana. The disciples of this Samhati are generally members of tribal communities and the so-called low-castes. To quote S.K. Bhuyan. "In other parts of India, the humiliation to which those unfortunates were subjected, drove them to the bosom of other religions, in Assam the liberal policy of the Kala-Samhati Satras endowed them with a sense of self-respect and individual value. These Satras made a great appeal to the unsophisticated Assamese people and thus they commanded unprecedented popularity"⁶⁵.

The Nika-Samhati was founded by Mathuradas Ata and Padma Ata alias Badula Ata. They organized their Satras in strict conformity with the rules and regulations prescribed by Madhavadeva and their purified sub-sect came to be known as Nika (pure, clean) Samhati⁶⁶.

The Sattras and the Ahom rulers: Confluence and Contradictions:

It was Madhavadeva, who was mainly responsible for the wide propagation of the Bhakti movement and the establishment of the Satras in different parts of the country. It was at his initiative that Gopaldeva of Bhavanipur undertook missionary works in eastern Assam, particularly

⁶⁴ Aauniati Satra Buranji, p.78.

⁶⁵ Bhuyan- Relations,p.197.

⁶⁶ Bhuyan-Rajeswr Singha,p.101.

amongst the tribal communities. The doctrine of human equality and the practice of community prayer appealed the tribesmen and within a short period, a large number of them entered the Vaishnava fold. Further the Vaishnava preachers were not merely propagating a faith but were also teaching the people different ways of production and trade pursuits. In the new social conditions created by this movement, peasants and artisans, traders and merchants could enjoy comparatively greater freedom and work unitedly for further progress of the society. Meanwhile, there appeared a class of small and middle land lords, who contended for political power in different parts of Assam. This new force was in alliance with the Vaishnavite leader and it was they, who won the people united under the Vaishnava Satras to their side in their struggle against the Ahom monarchy. This development culminated in the fall of the monarchy, which was signaled by the Moamariya rebellion⁶⁷.

The relations between the Satra and the state did not have a smooth sailing. While in the Ahom kingdom, Sankaradev and his men were engaged in an operation of elephant catching by king Suhungmung or the Dihingia Raja. Unfortunately, the elephants stampeded to the side of Sankaradeva's men. At this, the king ordered to behead the offending party. Sankaradeva and few others, however, escaped. But both Madhavadeva and Hari, Sankaradeva's son-in-law were made captives. Madhavadeva was later released but Hari was beheaded⁶⁸. Vamsigopaldeva, the first to propagate the new faith in the Ahom kingdom had to live in concealment for several years

⁶⁷ Sankardeva and his Times.

⁶⁸ Cited in S.L. Baruah, p.452.

and his Satra at Kalabari was set on fire at the orders of Pratap Singha⁶⁹. Gopaldeva of Bhavanipur, the founder of the Kala-Samhati, had two of his colleagues beheaded. Vamsigopaldeva's successor Misradeva also died in prison and his Satra at Kuruabahi was demolished at the orders of Pratap Singha⁷⁰. The fourth Mayamara Mahanta was not absolutely free from persecuting of the Vaishnavas. However, from Chakradhvaj Singha to the time of Sulikpha or Lora Raja, the Vaishnavas lived in comparative peace. But the growing wealth and prosperity of the Satras posing a threat to the Ahom monarchy induced Gadadhar Singha to adopt a policy of Vaishnava persecution, which will be discussed in this chapter later.

Although Rudra Singha reversed his fathers policy and tried to conciliate the Vaishnavas, the promulgation of the Synod of Garhgaon at his initiative, debarring the Sudra Satradhikars from initiating the Brahmanas, created a rift in the Vaishnava camp. The Sudra Satradhikars had reasons to believe that this act of the king had received some inspiration from their Brahmana counterparts.

One of the reasons for this persecution of the Sattra Gosains in the earlier period of kings like Suhungmung was because of the influence of the Brahmanas, who now assumed important positions in the Ahom court. Vaishnavism, as preached by Sri Sankaradeva, which was bereft of Brahmanical rituals was seen as a threat to the supremacy of the

⁶⁹ Mahanto, Asamar Satra Parichay, p.12.

⁷⁰ Aauniti, p.122.

Brahmans⁷¹. As discussed earlier the Ahom rulers too, could not afford to cause displeasure to their Brahman preceptors, as they had only recently accepted this fold, and any readjustment would totally debar them from achieving their long term goal. Besides, the ideal of submissiveness called *dasya* and the vegetarian food habit of its disciples might have also inspired the king to oppose the sect, who believed that, if encouraged, that would destroy the very back-bone of the military strength of the people. Yet, the undaunting spirit of the Vaishnava preceptors received its reward finally, when Swargodeo Jaydhvaj Singha, formally took initiation into the sect from Nirajandev, and thus became the first Ahom ruler to formally convert into Hinduism⁷². From him to the reign of Sulikpha or Iora raja, the Gosains lived in relative peace. Large scale lands grants were made to these Sattras during this period. The Sattras received not only land grants from the rulers but also huge number of Paiks along with it. The Swargodeos also bestowed these Sattras with timely donations to sustain the institution. This period saw the mushroom growth of Sattras in Assam. The Ahom rulers not only granted land to these Sattras but also built *namghars*, *manikuts* and the chambers of the bhakats for these Sattras.

One of the places that saw a large scale concentration of these Sattras was Majuli- the largest riverine island in the world, in the present Jorhat district.

⁷¹ Sarma Diganto, Itihakhe Khuora Rangpur, p.40.

⁷² Auniati, p.7.

The reason behind the concentration of Sattras in Majuli might be the easy availability of a large scale free land. Moreover, it might have been the policy of the Ahom rulers to keep all the Sattras cloistered in one single place, so that they could keep a watch over their proceedings. Majuli being surrounded by water on all side provided easy access too⁷³.

Again, many farmers had prospered in Majuli, the Sattras which were dependent on these farmers to provide them with food grains, found Majuli to be a perfect destination.⁷⁴

The famous Auniati Sattra in Majuli which claims to be the first Sattra in Assam (claim which can be questioned, as every Sattra makes this claim in Majuli) was established on a land grant made by King Jaydhvaj Singha to Pathak Niranjan Bapu, whose initiation he had taken. Niranjan Bapu was the first Sattradhikar of this Sattra.⁷⁵

The kumarbari Sattra is said to be built long before Auniati and Dakhinpat Sattra. Banshigopal, who was a Vaishnav Brahman from Sadiya established this Sattra. He is said to have won the favours of Budhi Swargonarayan or Pratap Singha who, built a Sattra for Banshi Gopal at Kurwabari and made him the Sattradhikar of the place⁷⁶. Therefore, we arrive at a conclusion that donation of land grants started long before Jaydhvaj Singh. Pratap Singha though a follower of Brahmanical order, received blessings from Banshi Gopal.

⁷³ Majuli, p.3.

⁷⁴ Majuli – Prashanto Kumar Mahanta. It is said that Sankardeva established the first Sattra in Belgurr, Majuli, which was destroyed by a flood in 1914 AD. And consequently was reestablished at Kasikota in Lakhimpur.

⁷⁵ Ashom Buranji by Harakanta Barua, p.79.

⁷⁶ Ahom Din, p. 12.

The Garhmar Sattra is also to be built with the initiative and grants of king Jaydhvaj Sinha. Gopaldev was its first Sattradhikar⁷⁷.

The Krishnamishra Sattra at Marangyal Goan in Nowgoan district was donated and built by King Rudra Sinha for one Gaurangodev⁷⁸.

Besides, the rulers other officials of the state also gave land grants to the Sattras. Even the rich Bhuyans and landed aristocracies also made grants to these Sattras. The Barpeta Sattra, initiated by Damodar Dev came into being when one Ram Larva (Ramchandra) donated a big plot of land to Sri Madhabdeva. He also became Madhavdevas disciple.⁷⁹

Even if the Gossains did not get land grants from the rulers, they would ask for it from any of the high officials who were initiated as their disciples. When Bodola Ata came from Uttarpar to Majuli to set up a Sattra, he asked his disciple Lakshmi Bezbarua for the land, on grant of which, Bodola Ata set up a Sattra here.⁸⁰

In this way, with the land grants received from the rulers and other high officials, the Sattras institution flourished by leap and bounds. So much that every nook and corner of the state had atleast one Sattra. It was not just land grant that these Gossain received. Along with it came the Paiks, Cattles, Slaves, and above all the donations from the royal house to keep them sustained, as these Sattras survived on donations. Another reason for the mushroom growth was that whenever a Sattradhikar passed away all his

⁷⁷ Asomor Satra Parichay – S.K. Bhattacharya, p.18.

⁷⁸ Ibid,p.132.

⁷⁹ Bardowa & Barpeta Satra, p.22.

⁸⁰ Majuli- Prashanta Kumar Mahanta,p.42.

sons, would manage a plot of land and set up a Sattra there, becoming the *Sattradhikar*⁸¹.

In a span of few years, a whole network of Sattras had sprung up. Every village had initiation into a particular Sattra and had to pay dual alliance to the Sattra and the state.

Even in the royal house, the Sattradhikars began to exert a lot of influence. According to Buranjis from Jayadhvaj Sinha to Sulikpha every ruler sought blessing from the Gossain. The Gossains started to have a say in a political matters too. In a nutshell, the Sattras had received such impetus, that in a span of four decades, they became a force to be reckoned with.

This system of offering patronage to the Sattras received a serious setback during the reign of king Godadhar Sinha.⁸² The Swagodev started with a serious policy of persecuting the Vaishnava Saints. This system of persecution of the Vaishnava Saints reached its peak in the reign of king Siva Singha, in whose court Sakta from the worship received its zenith. His chief queen, Phuleswari, in whose hands, the reins of the administration actually was, under the initiative of the Sakta priests summoned the Sudra Mahanta to the court and greatly insulted them. The Sudra Mahantas who could never forget this insult, were infuriated against this behaviour. This and other series of events, which we shall discuss later, added fuel to the fire, which saw the culmination in the Moamaria rebellion. The civil war took the Ahom kingdom by a storm and greatly shook its foundation. The superstructure of the Ahom

⁸¹ Ibid, p.43.

⁸² 1681-1696 A.D.

Kingdom which stood on this weak foundation did not take long to topple down, and soon the illustrious Ahoms who ruled for six centuries became history.

Gadadhar Singha's persecution of the Gosains has been given the colour of personal animosity by many.⁸³ But this is more apparent than real.

Gadadhar Singha's personal animosity was one of the many reasons for the persecution. But he was too far sighted a person to put on stake the whole future of the dynasty for his personal whims. Gadadhar Singha's personal encounter with the Sattras happened when he was on the run. The political instability caused by the high handedness of one Laluk Sola Barpukhan had created havoc in the country. Laluk Sola who was a Barphukan with the Ahom forces, refused to remain subservient to Atan Buragohain, who had now taken the reins of the kingdom into his own hands. By the help of a coup Laluk Sola captured the Buhagohain and killed him. He now took the reigns of the kingdom in his own hands and placed a boy of fourteen years on the throne, who was but a mere puppet in the Barphukan's hand, Lora Raja or Sulikpha was this new ruler⁸⁴. Barphukan wanted to assume the rank of the king himself. It is said that he communicated his design to the Emperor of Delhi, who sent a reply conveying his approval, whether it is true or not, there is no doubt that he openly asserted his equality with the king.⁸⁵ Laluk Sola gave new orientation to the Ahom rights of kingship by declaring that a prince having any physical

⁸³ H.K. Barpujari.

⁸⁴ Bhuyan, Atan Buragohain & his Times, p. 184.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 186.

deformity, even being pock-marked on visible parts of the body, would not be eligible to sit on the throne. In pursuance of this principle, he under the orders of the king, is said to have killed or several hundred scions of the royal family⁸⁶.

Gadapani, later Gadadhar was the son of Gobar, an earlier Ahom ruler, and a member of the Tungkhungia clan. He was held to be the most eligible candidate to the throne. He on the pursuance of his wife, Jaymati went on a hiding and later with the help of few nobles was successful in defeating Laluk Sola and taking the Ahom throne for himself⁸⁷.

It was during his absconding days, that Gadadhar Singha came to Dakhinpat Sattrra to seek asylum. He met the Sattradikar Bonomali Bapu and sought for his help. Bonomali Bapu showed no interest in his plea and gave him a very cold response. Gadapani was made to stay with the lay disciples, given food of very low quality and had to leave the Sattrra with a broken heart. But it is said that Gadapani could never forget this insult and therefore when he became the ruler he look revenge on them⁸⁸.

But this was just a pretext to a much more grave situation. If Gadadhar Simha had to take revenge on this Sattradhikars for his personal insult, he would have done it immediately on his accession to the throne. He would have not waited for twelve long years to embark on this persecution.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Assam Buranji N.16.

⁸⁷ SMAB, p. 145.

⁸⁸ Bhuyan, Assam Buranji, p. 145.

⁸⁹ Auniati Sattrra Buranji, p. 112.

The reason for his persecution was more political than being religious or personal. Gadadhar Sinha realised the danger that the growing power of the Sattras would pose to the state. As, we have seen in this chapter, encouraged by the grants of the Ahom rulers and the high officials, there was a mushroom growth of Sattras all over the state. Again, the patronage given by the rulers to the Gosains made them all powerful. The Sattras, along with the Paiks, disciples and bhakats went on to become something like state within a state.

The vast riches of the Sattras highly alarmed the king. The Sattras which received religious tax (*dharma-kar*) from its disciples, were further endowed with rich donations from the kings and other high officials. The two main Sattras of Kuruabarhi and Garmukh, under royal patronage soon grew very prosperous. The other Sattras were also not economically backward. The Sattras had vast extent of land under their occupation, sometimes exceeding 30,000 puras of land and they enjoyed the service of several hundreds of Paiks.⁹⁰ Gadadhar Singha, while at Dakhinpat Sattra was bewildered to find there, as in many other Sattras, a life full of pleasure and ceremonialism, which in some points surpassed the parapheralia of the Ahom king and the splendour of the royal court.⁹¹ The Sattradhikar of Dakhinpat, for instance, possessed a large gold image of Vishnu, which came to the notice of Gadadhar Singha.⁹²

⁹⁰ Tunkhungia Buranji, p.29.

⁹¹ Ibid.,p.15.

⁹² Ibid.

The Sattras which were initially constructed to impart religious preaching, later became more and more engrossed with accumulation of wealth. The Vaishnava Literature is replete with instances of the saints and disciples engaging in trade activities. Not only the Saints, but also the Paiks under their jurisdiction were engaged in trade. Madhabdeva, the apostolate of Sankardeva according to his biographer Ramananda Dvija earned his livelihood, by trade in pearl and corals in Eastern Assam procured from Bengal. Mention has been made in Katha Guru Charit that Narayan Thakur alias Bhabananda earned his livelihood by sale of mustard seed and other commodities such as of betel – leaf , ivory, gold, silk, black pepper which were available cheaper in Upper Assam were sold out at a higher price in Western Assam.⁹³

Infact, the Sattras had become a source of earning for the Vaishnava Saints.⁹⁴ So, much so that whenever a Gossain passed away, all his sons would start a new Sattras and become the Sattradhikar.⁹⁵

Seeing this vast wealth of the Sattras Rangasaran Bhandari Baruah told Gadadhar Sinha- "Why does a bhakat need so much wealth? All he needs is rice, which too, is given by his disciples. If your majesty gives the permission, this wealth can be brought to the state treasury".⁹⁶ At this Gadadhar Singha granted his permission. A wealth recovery expedition was sent. Bhandari Barua himself went to Dakhinpat Sattras and brought back the

⁹³ KGC.

⁹⁴ Aauniata Sattras Buraji- "Bitter but true, the Sattras had become a source of livelihood for the Gosains, p.128.

⁹⁵ Most of the Sattradhikars were family men.

⁹⁶ Aauniata Sattras Buranji, p.155.

gold statue. The royal soldiers also brought back cows, buffaloes etc, from the Sattra, similar expeditions were sent to other Sattras too⁹⁷.

Another reason for this persecution was the large scale absorption of bhakat by these Sattras. It was King Jaydhvaj Singha who exempted celibate disciples from personal labour to the state.⁹⁸

It was therefore only a matter of time before a large scale population of the state initiated themselves with any Sattra to forgo the compulsory Paik system. With the mushroom growth of the Sattras, the Kanri Paiks did not find much problem in escaping this compulsory labour. The Asam Buranji recovered from Sri Gajendra Phukan gives a rough estimate of this number. From Nowgoan's Barduwa to Majuli, there were atleast 3000, bhakats who were enrolled with any Sattra. In Seuni 1200, Tarajan Seuni 500, Gogaldubi-400, Ghiladhari Seuni-900, Barduwa Sattra alone housed a number of 2000 bhakats. The significance such large clusters in sattra huge number must be made keeping in mind the sparse population of the time. This created a serious hurdle in the state labour force. It, may be recalled here that the Paik system was initiated to provide the Ahom rulers with required labour force and also a standing militia to repulse any anticipated Mughal attack. Now, with this escapist tendency of the people, the whole state system seemed to collapse. Ofcourse, the situation was made grave by the high handedness of the rulers. The restrictions put on the paiks were too much for them to bear. Moreover, when the Kanri Paiks saw that the upper castes and high officials

⁹⁷ Ibid, p.156.

⁹⁸ Ahom Buranji recovered from Hari Kanta Barua.

could escape this compulsory service by paying commutation money, they were very depressed. With the coming of the Sattras, they found an easy escape route from this strenuous routine. Therefore, this system of Kanri Paik was a boomerang for the Ahoms.

The Sattras were also inducting a spirit of leisure and laid-back attitude into its disciples. Once while traveling with an official King Gadadhar Singha heard the sound of many hands clapping together. On enquiry his official told him that the Vaishanava bhakats were praying.⁹⁹ Godadhar Singha replied "Mere clapping of hands is not taks done"¹⁰⁰ *Gusil mur kaaj, hattali, diya more kila Crase Kaaj, Padya Baranji*. He was clever enough to perceive the situation that this would lead to it left uninterrupted. The people were already becoming pleasure-seekers and lazy. He therefore, embarked on a policy of capturing these bhakats and getting them back to the state services. The "Dhodar Ali", in Sibsgar a road was constructed by some of these captured bhakats under the initiative of Gadadhar Singha. The very appellation "Dhodar Ali" means a road constructed by the "lazy pleasure-seekers"¹⁰¹.

Not only this, the Sattras started to replicate the state in every possible way. To administer these Bhakat, officials were appointed. Phukans, Hazarika, Saikia, Bora etc parallel to the pattern of Ahom administrative set up was introduced.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ The "Naam" or prayer in Sankariya Sharma is done by clapping of hands and singing praises of the lord.

¹⁰⁰ Auniat, pp. 146.

¹⁰¹ SMAB.

¹⁰² Tunkhumgia Buranji

Other officials like those of Medhis and Sajtotals for collecting religious taxes or bringing disciples for initiation were created. Thus, a state within a state had grown up.,

Encouraged by the patronage given by the earlier Ahom rulers Javdhavaj and Chakradhvaj, that the Gossains had started transgressing their limit and began to interfere with the political matters of the state. Gossain of Dakshinapat Sattrra, dissuaded Bandar Barphukan from making Godadhar Singha King, "you are one of my disciples, and so as you know is Lora Raja. I am, therefore the virtual sovereign. So, did not indulge in such an act. I advice you to confer on me the sovereignty to the kingdom."¹⁰³ Infact, after getting the throne for himself when Gadadhar Sinha went to seek Dakshinpat Gossains blessings, the latter refused¹⁰⁴.

Earlier too, Dakshinpat Sattrra Gosain meddled in the king making process. At the death bed of Jaydhvaj Sinha, the king summoned Bonomali Dev to Sibsagar and entrusted him with the responsibility of the state. After Chakradhvaj Sinha was elected the ruler, the Gosain transferred the responsibility over to him¹⁰⁵. Emboldened by such favoures, the Gosains started to think of themselves as the real sovereign and thus tried to become king-makers. Godadhar Singha got in an understanding that this, if not stopped immediately would be extremely detrimental to the state. The state would have to function according to the whims of the Gosains.

¹⁰³ Asom Buraji recovered from Sukumar Mahanta. The growing power of the Mahantas can be assume from the fact the two Moamariya Chiefs Sarbananda and Bharath Singha in the declining period of the Ahom rule minted coins, an erstwhile prerogative of the sovereign only.

¹⁰⁴ Auniati, p. 150.

¹⁰⁵ Ahomor Din S.K. Bhuyan, p. 23.

Gadadhar Simha was also found that love for ease and comfort made some of the Sattradhikars blind to their spiritual duties. The vegetarianism preached also effected the martial spirit of the people. Gait cites another ground for Gadadhar Singha's anxiety about the possible menace from Vaishnava priesthood. He states that "Gadadhar Singha was himself a good liver and he feared the physical deterioration that might ensue, if his people obeyed the injunction of the Gosains and abstained from eating the flesh of cattle, swine and fowls and from indulging in strong drinks."¹⁰⁶

In the process of executing the policy of the king towards the Vaishnava priests, many Sattras were pillaged and their heads were either killed or banished to Namrup, Toklai and such other out-of-the way places. The Auniato Gosain Keshab Deb escaped to an Chukija village in Sadiya. Ram Bapu the Dushinpat Gosain was captured and deprived of his eyesight, besides his property was confiscated and his gold and silver idols were melted down¹⁰⁷. Money was also extorted from the Medhis. The false Kewalia bhakats were forced to eat the flesh of Swine, Cows, fowls and robbed of their properties and compelled to do manual labour.

Some of them mutilated and others put to death and a few others were offered up as to idols.¹⁰⁸ In course of time, even innocent persons fell victim to persecution. When the king learnt of the ferocity of his fanaticism, he ordered

¹⁰⁶ HAG, p. 133.

¹⁰⁷ SAB, p.117f.

¹⁰⁸ HAG

persecution to be stopped and restitution to be made in all of wronging cases.¹⁰⁹

It was therefore, in anticipation of a "sattra controlled state situation", that Gadadhar Singha embarked on this policy of persecution of the Vaishnava saints. Many would suggest, his inclination towards Saktism sattra order as the reason for this persecution. But Gadadhar Singha was never a very religious man. He was not a fanatic. Though Gadadhar Singha was a Hindu believing in the Brahmanical order, he, actually practiced the Ahom religious tenants. His daily life was dictated by the Ahom religious teachings. He did not have any staunch inclination towards Hindu faith. Infact his favourite food was roasted calf with spring rice, this at a time when the Brahman dominated Ahom courts of his predecessors had put a bar on the consumption of beef even for the Musalmans.¹¹⁰ True, in comparison between the Sakta and Vaishnava order, Gadadhar Singha found the former more liberal and acceptable. He found certain similarities between the Sakta order and his Ahom religions dictates¹¹¹.

One, therefore cannot zero down upon his religious bigotry as the reason behind his persecution. Gadadhar Singha had neither great inclination towards Brahmanism nor Vaishnavism. He was governed by his indigenous Ahom rituals

¹⁰⁹ It is said that Gadadhar Singha suggested his son to reinstate all the Vaishnava Gosains and Mahantas deposed or persecuted by him – Buranji Vivek Ratna.

¹¹⁰ ADB, p.69.

¹¹¹ Devi, Rudra Singha, p. 30.

It is therefore a logical conclusion that the foresightness of the ruler made him undertake those steps. Any able ruler would perceive the menace brewing from the Sattras. Therefore, in order to save his state and the throne from being mere puppets in the hands of the Gossains, Gadadhar Singha had to undertake these measures, which was not the case with his successors, Siva Singha, Rajeswar Singha and Lakshmi Singha. It was religious bigotry that led these rulers to heap insults on the Gossains. Their inexperience in the art of state administration led them to take these measures which triggered off the Moamaria rebellion.¹¹²

The dissensions created by Gadadhar Singha among the Vaishnava saints was undone by his able successor Rudra Singha. Rudra Singha, following the words of his father decided to reinstate the Vaishnava *Gosains* and *Mahanta*. Besides, he also calculated imminent danger lest the persecuted *Gosains* and *Mahantas* were not reconciled but concluded that in doing this, the supremacy of the king over the *Sattras* could not be sacrificed. He, therefore, resorted to a new policy of reducing the power of the *Satradhikars*. He brought them back and ordered that the Brahmana *Gosains* should have their headquarters in Majuli. He perhaps believed that Majuli being nearer to the Ahom metropolis, the movement of the *Gosain* would be within the reach of his supervision. He received the Auniati *Gosain*, who was the most influential of the Brahmana *Satradhikars*, as his religious

¹¹² The Mayamaya Satra was founded by Aniruddha Bhuyan, a relative of Sankardeva towards the end of 16thC. It was a member of the Kala Samhali, which was well known for its egalitarian and humanitarian outlook.

preceptor¹¹³. This recognition of the spiritual superiority of the *Gosain* helped him into create conditions for asserting the supremacy of the king in other's matters. Deviating from his father's policy of patronizing Saktism and by accepting the Vaishnava *Gosain* as his preceptor, Rudra Singha was simply meeting the exigency of the time. Soon he pursued a policy of divide and rule, so as to prevent an excessive accumulation of power in the hands of the *Satradhikars*, which he got materialized through the *Synod of Garhgaon* (1702). This synod debarred the Sudra *Mahantas* from initiating the Brahmanas¹¹⁴. By this, Rudra Singha engineered a clash between the two parties attending the synod-the Brahmanas and the Sudra *Mahanta*. So humiliated, the *Mahantas* grew wary not only of the Ahom monarchy but also of those Brahmanas, both Saktas and Vishnavas, who sided with the king.

Siva Singha, the son and successor of Rudra Singha was greatly influenced by Brahmana priests and astrologers. Following the advice of his father, he accepted initiation from the Parvatiya *Gosain* and put him in charge of the Kamakhya temple. In 1722, his spiritual guides and astrologers predicted an end of his rule in the near future due to the evil consequence of the *chatra-bhang-yoga*. Therefore, at the suggestion of the Parvatiya *Gasain*, he readily consented to endow his chief queen Phuleswari with the supreme vest. The latter accordingly took the regalia to her hands with the title *Bar Raja* or the 'chief-king and minted coins in the joint names of her and her husband.

¹¹³ Aauniati, p. 10.

¹¹⁴ TB, p. 38f.

Phuleswari was originally a dancer named Phulmati attached to the Siva temple at Dergaon. Captivated by her beauty, the king married her and named as Pramatheswari. Phuleswari actually took the reins of government to her hands and "meddled too much in matters of religion and customs," which was detrimental to the interest of the state¹¹⁵.

Phuleswari was more under the influence of the Brahmanas, particularly the Parvatiya *Gosain*, than her husband. At the instigation of this *Gosain*, she attempted to make Saktism the state religion. Over zealous to execute her plan, she even summoned the Sudra *Mahantas* to the *Durga Puja* held in a Sakta shrine and compelled them to bow their heads before the goddess, have their foreheads besmeared with the blood of the sacrificed animals and made them accept *nirmali* and *prasad*¹¹⁶. More than others, the powerful Mayamara *Mahanta* considered it a serious insult. Not the ones to forget or forgive, and in consultation with his disciples, he decided to take vengeance at an opportune moment. Phuleswari also suppressed the age-old Ahom custom of burying their dead and compelled them to take to cremation¹¹⁷. The subsequent history of Assam is essentially a history of Moamariya rebellion, which was the most important factor causing the downfall of the Ahom monarchy.

Rajeswar Singha who followed next was an orthodox Hindu. He erected many temple and made gifts to Brahmanas. He was a disciple of the Nati Gosain, a relative of Parvatiya Gosain. In his court, preponderance of

¹¹⁵ Gogoi P, pp. 510f.

¹¹⁶ ABHB, p. 71.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Saktism made both the king and the nobles priest ridden and 'sectarian and disputes began to strangle over their patriotic aspiration."¹¹⁸

It was during his reign that one Kirti Chandra Barbarua, rose to prominence. Rajeswar Singha being an incapable ruler yielded to his pressure, so much that the Barbarua became the main policy maker. Kirti Chndra, who was a member of the Dihing Sattra, heaped great insult to the Mayamara Mahanta.¹¹⁹ With a view to counter acting the growing influence of the Mayamara Sattra, the Barbarua raised his guru to an eminent position at the royal court. Over-zealous to subdue the Moamariyas, he used to find fault with them in every matter. For instance he abused the Mahanta's eldest son Bayan, the Deka Mahanta with insulting epithets on the ground that the latter had greeted king Rajeswar Singha near his Sattna, on his arrival there on way from Dergaon to Rangpur but remained indifferent to the Barbarua who also accompanied the King¹²⁰. It is said the Barbarua went on to invent stores to cast a slur on the moral character of the Mahantas and instigated the king Lakshmi singha to return the usual monthly tribute normally sent by the Mahanta, and caused its bearer to be punished for bringing it from an unholy person.¹²¹

Again in early October 1769, Naravkhora & Ragha Maran both disciples of he Mayamara Sattra were mercilessly beaten and the ears of the

¹¹⁸ Tunkhungia Buranji.

¹¹⁹ Dihing and Mayamara Sattra were the two most prominent Satra of Kala Samhati Group. Dihin Sattra secured royal patronage and could claim leading officers of the Ahom Court during Raeswar Singha's reign, while the Mayamara Sattra declined all court favours.

¹²⁰ Bhuyan, Relations, p. 256.

¹²¹ Buranji Vivek Ratna, vol. III.

former cut off at the order of Barbarua on alleged charges of bringing him lean elephants¹²².

All these atrocities started since the reign of Siva Singha saw the culmination in the first Moamaria uprisal during the reign of king Lakshmi Singha in 1769-1770. There were subsequent, Moamariya rebellion from, 1780-1795. Though religious in pretext it soon took the colour of a civil war with all section of the society, who were displeased with the Ahom rule joining in.

So, serious was the jolt received from these uprisals that the Ahom royalty had to seek the help of the British army. It was the first time that any external power had come to negotiate the internal politics of the Ahom ruler. This first step led to seeking of British help once again during the Burmese onslaught. This time the British who had come to repulse the Burmese stayed back and with the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826 became the defacto ruler of Assam. And so , the glorious rule of the Ahom for six centuries got relegated to the pages of history books.

The Ahom therefore saw themselves getting caught up in a situation, which ironically was created by them. The lavish patronage given by the initial Ahom rulers to the Sattra, led to the situation where the very existence of the state was threatened by the growing power of the Sattras. King Gadadhar Singha understood the call of the time and ere too long took to mend it. Naturally, he found himself in the badbooks of the Vaishnava saints, who

¹²² Ibid.

harboured a grudge against the royalty. The situations was aggravated during the rule of the last few rulers, who blinded by their religious bigotry committed atrocities on the Gosains. In spite of Gadadhar Singha's hope of keeping religion out of state, affairs, this continued to happen and saw a culmination in the Moamariya uprising which was the last nail in the coffin for the Ahoms.

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

This dissertation, which has focused at different aspects of Ahom Society, has highlighted an apparent paradox in this society. Assam was truly a 'mundunsungkham' in its wealth of its natural and material resources. Any other state, in the possession of such rich resources would have prospered significantly. Yet, Assam remained less developed in comparison to some other contemporary region like Gujrat and Bengal and remains so even today. In this conclusion, an attempt will be made to provide some provisional answers to this hiatus in the light of the evidenced collected in the work.

Medieval India saw a great boom of commerce in other states. Great trading networks were being established elsewhere. Why then, Assam with probably the greatest potential of entering this trading network remained fairly untouched? This is one question that have intrigued scholars, and there have been many view to explain this relative backwardness.

The common explanation is the policy of isolation, which the Ahom rulers adhered to. Anticipating a further eastern expansion of the Mughals, after conquering Bengal in 1576, the Ahoms played their cards safe. They stuck to a closed-door policy. This got a boost from the policy of their abhorrence of anything "Foreign". The Assam Buranji speaks of an interesting episode.¹ The Assamese of yore abhorred the idea of using foreign apparels. Naranarayan (the Koch ruler, 1540-1587) sent several presents to the Ahom ruler, including five beautiful sarees made in

¹ Assam Buranji (ed) – S.K. Bhuyan.

Barnagar. The four katakis who brought the presents were informed, "the five sarees which you have brought here are worn by undesirable women of our country. They are not worn by men. How is that you being ambassadors have brought these apparels?"

In another instance King Rudra Singha presented his ministers sets of garments of Mogul fashion constituting of cloaks, headdress and shoes. The three Dangarias returned the present saying, "why should we wear fashion of foreigners in supercession of our own indigenous costumes".²

Again the Ahoms were very particular about, guarding their "casket of gold" from the foreigners. Talish in account has mentioned that "..... the intercourse of foreigners into Assam was very limited. They allow no strangers to enter this territory and they prevent their own people from leaving the country".³

Another reason given is the self-sufficiency of the people, and their limited wants. Everything the people needed for subsistence was produced locally. Their wants were also very limited, so they were complacent, with whatever they had. They did not have to turn to others for the necessities of their life. The simple life habits of the Assamese accompanied by the self-sufficiency led to production of what was considered absolutely necessary for their annual need. Rice which was the staple food was produced by everybody for their personal use. They used to weave their own clothes. Other necessities like vegetables, fish etc was also available locally. M. Kazim

²cited in S.K. Bhuyan- Studies in the history of Assam.

³JBORS.

remarks. "It is not necessary for the inhabitants to buy provisions for daily use, because they keep a stock for themselves which last for them a year."⁴ Shihabuddin Talish remarked, "it was not the practice of the Assamese to buy any of the articles of food in markets all the inhabitants store in their house one year supply of food of all kinds...".⁵

Another very debated reason for the lack of development is the supposedly lazy and indolent nature of the people. H.K. Barpujari says that the climate of the area makes "the inhabitants ease loving and not industries or enterprising".⁶ Adds to it that "Any race that had been long resident there would gradually becomes soft and luxurious.....".⁷

All the reasons do have logic in them and even may be true to a certain extent. The problem however lay deeper, somewhere within the system which had the above mentioned external manifestations. The Ahoms social structure needs to be properly analysed to find an answer to it. The Ahoms as we have seen, in the second chapter, organized the population according to Paik system. According to it every male member of the population between the age of sixteen to fifty was required to render physical labour for the state. The Paiks besides rendering their personal service to the state had to fulfil some obligation to their masters as well (i.e. the officers put incharge of them). For example, when called upon to do so, they were to cultivate the lands of their master and had to offer them gifts on certain occasion.

⁴ Cited in H.K. Barpujari. Vol. III.

⁵ JBORS

⁶ Assam in the Days of company.

⁷ HAG.

The paiks in return for their services to the state were allotted two puras of the best arable land called ga-mati, free of charge. The land however, belonged to the khel and a paik who held his share of land, had no hereditary claim to it, which was allotted to him only by the community. The paik was literally tied to the land, i.e. the territory or khel. This way of life was fixed by the state and he had no right to alter it. This paik system gave the Paiks no liberty to pursue any other independent trade or profession to improve their standard of living. The paiks were kept busy for most part of the year with rendering service to the state, in other times they were required to offer services in the land of the masters. The exploitation of the Paiks therefore was optimum. Their plight was further made more miserable, when they saw the paiks of higher birth could easily buy their exemption from the compulsory service by paying a commutation money. These Kanri paiks were also transferred along with land grants to the donees. Their life therefore was at the whims and fancies of the masters. Their condition of a large section of the society hindered the expansion of common and complex trading or occupational networks, as most of the time they were so engrossed in state services, that they got no time to engage in any other profession. This situation was further aggravated with the growing popularity of the Vaisnava movement. Its egalitarian concept drew members from all sections into its fold. The paiks found the movement as a means to emancipation from their exploitation. Most of the paiks registered themselves as bhakats in the satras, as king Jayadhvaj Singha had started the system of exempting celibate bhakats from performing personal labour to the state.

Soon, a large number of the paiks took refuge in these sattras, which in itself caused problems in the state administration, as there was a dearth of people for state services. This situation further acted as a deterrent to the growth of trade as the people instead of labour took to a life of leisure and cloth under the cover of religion. King Gadadhar Singha did take drastic steps to undo this situation. He was successful to an extent, but the undemocratic steps of his successors agitated the Vaishnava Gosains which culminated in the Moamariya uprising. Though at first a religious war, it soon took the color of a civil war with all sections of the society who were dissatisfied with the Ahom monarchy taking sides with it.

It was therefore, the problems within the Ahom system of administration, which was responsible for the relative economic retardenes of medieval and early-modern Assam, compared to other neighboring state.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX-A

Chronology of Ahom Kings

Name of the king	Period of Rule A.D.
Sukapha	1228-1268
Suteupha	1268-1281
Subinpha	1281-1293
Sukhangpha	1293-1332
Sukhranpha	1332-1364
Interregnum	1364-1369
Sutupha	1369-1376
Interregnum	1376-1380
Tao-Khamthi	1380-1389
Interregnum	1389-1397
Sudangpha or Bamuni-konwar	1397-1407
Sujangpha	1407-1422
Suphakpha	1422-1439
Susenpha	1439-1488
Suhenpha	1488-1493

Supimpha	1493-1497
Suhungmung or Dihingia Raja	1493-1539
Suklenmung or Gargayan Raja	1539-1552
Sukhampha or Khora Raja	1552-1603
Susengpha or Pratap Singha or Buddhi-Swarganarayan or Burha Raja	1603—1641
Surampha or Bhaga Raja or Jayaditya	1641-1644
Sutyinpha or Naria Raja	1644-1648
Sutamla or Jayadhvaj Singha	1648-1663
Supungmung or Chakradhvaj Singha	1663-1670
Sunyatpha or Udyaditya Singha	1670-1672
Suklampha or Ramadhvaj singha	1672-1674
Suhung or Samaguria Raja(only for 21 days)	1674-1675
Gobar Raja (only for 24days)	1675-1675
Sujinpha or Arjun Dihingia Raja	1675-1677
Sudaipha or Parvatia Raja	1677-1679
Sulikpha or Rahadhvaj Singha	1679-1681
Supatpha or Gadadhar Singha	1681-1696
Sukhrangpha or Rudra Singha	1696-1714
Sutanpha or Siva Singha	1714-1744

Sunenpha or Pramatta Singha	1744-1751
Surampha or Rajeswar Singha	1751-1769
Sunyeopha or Lakshmi Singha	1769-1780
Suhitpungha or Gaurinath Singha	1780-1795
Suklingpha or Kamaleswar Singha	1795-1811
Sudingpha or Chandrakanta Singha	1811-1818
Purandar Singha	1818-1819
Sudingpha or Chandrakanta Singha (second time)	1819-1821
Burmese rule with the puppet Ahom king	—
Jogeswar Singha on the throne	1821-1824
British conquest of Assam	1824-1825
Treaty of Yandaboo	1826
(by this treaty the king of Burma ceded Assam to the British Company Government)	
Purandar singha as a tributary ruler of upper Assam	1833-1838

APPENDIX-B

The Satgharia Ahoms

This appendix is peep into the social history of the Ahoms, which is interwoven with their administrative history and organization of aristocracy. The term 'Ahom' does not mean a particular caste of tribe (jat) or race (kula) like Koch, Kalita or Keot. It implies a community (Sampradaya) or clan or group consisting of several families (foids, phoids). Men of various castes, high or low, or groups were included under this appellation. Further all Ahoms did not belong to a homogeneous class. Respectable high class Ahoms were termed *Satgharia* Ahoms or Ahoms of the seven houses, or class of seven Ahom families, as Sukapha came with his associates belonging to seven families so designated. It is significant that through the term *Satgharia* Ahoms persisted through the ages, their membership of composition, instead of remaining constant at seven, went on changing, expanding or contracting, from time to time¹. Besides seven *Satgharia* Ahoms to which the early Dangarias belonged, there were also twenty four original other called bonafide (Niyamar) Ahoms or Jatuwa Ahoms who came with Sukapha².

¹ Vamsavali Katha, MS. Sibsagar (2). Approximate date of compilation after A.D. 1635 in Pratap Simha's reign, Barbarua, Ahomar Din, 504-6, gives the most detailed treatment; PAB 26-7.

² E.g. (i) Chiring-dang (ii) Laut; (iii) Kanai Patra; (iv) Kal-nu, (v) Laito; (vi) Phang-mung-khang; (vii) la-muk; (viii) Cheng-Khun; (ix) La-pak; (x) Fa-lung; (xi) Ka-na-pang; (xii) Ching-la; (xiii) Kenan-cheng; (xiv) La-reng; (xv) Na-rip; (xvi) Tamai; (xvii) Ba-reng; (xviii) NeOmung; (xix) Bar-ring; (xx) Ba-gan; (xxi) Ba-chang; (xxii) Phang-phai; (xxiii) Eo-mung; (xxiv) Kha-ming. Mass. Sibsagar (2) f 1-2; in Buranjis, 136.

Subinpha (1283-93), the third king, not only entered the fold of *Satgharia* Ahoms himself but also included four priestly families, the *Mohun*, *Bailung*, *Deodhai* and *Chiring*, thereby raising the number of the component units of the *Satgharia* Ahoms to twelve. Further, he created twelve *Jatuwa* Ahom families himself. *Dihingia* Raja (1497-1539) at first left the *Satgharia* Ahoms unchanged. But the *Chiring* family became heir-less and was replaced by that of *Pandit Manga*. While the creation of the post of *Barpatra Gohain* raised the number of the *Satgharia* from 12 to 13³. The number of *Jatuwa* Ahoms under him became 72, some by creation and then by reorganization⁴.

Through centuries from *Sukapha* onwards, persons, families and groups from various tribes and castes- *Morans*, *Barahis*, *Chutiyas*, *Kacharis*, hill-tribes (*Nagas*, *Miris*, *Daflas*, *Mikirs*, *Garos*, *Syntengs*) etc, the *Bhuyans*, the *Kalitas* and *Brahmans* were slowly being absorbed in Ahom society and raised in the social order. As their numerous descendants naturally claimed special privileges. *Dihingia* Raja had to screen their claims. With the exception of claimants with genuine genealogical tables all others were weeded out like *Binaiguti* grass in a paddy field. Hence arose the urgent need of maintaining accurate *Vamsavalis*.

In the Beginning of the reign of *Jayadhwaj Simha* (1648-63) there was no change in the constitution of the *Satgharia* Ahoms. Later on, after his open

³ (i) King; (ii) *Burhagohain*; (iii) *Bargohain* (iv) *Adabariya Sandikoi* *Thaomungtyao*; (v) *Thaomung Kankhungmung* (*Rup Sandikoi*); (vi) *Thaomungtyao*; (vii) *Thaomungkeron-gkham*; (viii) *Ne-mung*; (xix) *Ba-ring*; (xx) *Ba-gan*; (xxi) *Ba-chang*; (xxii) *Phang-phai*; (xxiii) *Eo-mung*; (xxiv) *Kha-ming*. *Mss. Sibsagar* (2) f 1-2; in *Buranjis*, 136.

⁴ *Dhingia* Raja is said to have created 60 additional *Jatuwa* Ahoms. This together with 24 of *Sukapha* and 12 of *Subinpha* would have raised the total number to 96. Evidently there must have been some readjustments.

adoption of Hinduism (at first through Niranjan Bapu of Auniati Satra and then through Banamalideva of Daksinpat), practically all high caste Ahoms embraced Hinduism. The traditional Ahom priestly families (Mohun, Bailung and Deodhai) began to denounce the neophyte Hindu Ahoms. So Jayadhwaj reorganized the Ahoms to the exclusion of those traditional priestly families as follows:

- (i) The Bangahas (family) of the king, the Burhagohain, the Bargohain (Naga Barpatra) and the Barpatra, 4.
- (ii) The foids of Sandikoi (Adabaria), Lahan, Duara, Dihingia, Chetia, Lukhurakan, Kunwar, Chengahara, Bakatiyal, Patar, Chiring and Langi-12, Total-16
- (iii) In this way though the name Satgharia Ahoms survived, its composition did not conform to the number7.

APPENDIX-C

1.Imports and Exports, 1794*

IMPORTS

From the Eastern confines of Suddea, Copper, Cotton, Spring Salt, Fir trees (sic)⁵.

From the northern confines Miree supplies Copper, Munjeet, Onka, and Duffala supply Munjeet, Long Peper, Ginger, Goondan, Maytoon and animal of the kine species; Botan supplies musk, Blankets, Cow tails, small Horses, Gola (sic) Borax, Rock salt, Naint a kind of cloth, Goom Sing a embroidered cloth, Daroka a silk of mixture of green, red and yellow colours.

From the Southern confines, Naga supplies cotton, Luckibillia (a silk cloth), Toatbund (silk cloth), Narakapore (embroidered silk), red hair, and Nagajatee (spears). The Garrows supply cotton, copper, iron, coarse cloth,.

From the Western confines or Bengal, copper and other metals, red lead, woollens of Europe chiefly of the coarser kind, cottons of Bengal chiefly of the coarser kind, chinty, particularly kinkhafs, cloves, nutmegs, mace, cinnamon, blue Vitniol(?) assafetida (sic), alum, darmook(?), Orpiment (a variety of drugs), salt.

⁵ Hamilton, An Account of Assam, 45-6.

EXPORTS

The exports to Bengal only will be noticed here; they are divided into: 1st. The produce of the other confines; 2nd. The produce of Assam.

No.1: Cotton in considerable quantity, *Munjeet* in doubtful quantity, fir trees(?) probably in any quantity, ginger probably in some quantity. Borax probably in considerable quantity, musk in considerable quantity (and) small horses.

No.2: The merchantable produce of Assam be considered at more length under three heads of vegetable, mineral and animal productions.

(i) Vegetable

Sugar cane thrives in every part of Assam. The cane of the best quality affords a granulated sugar, on experiment superior to the cane of Rungpore. The natives convert the juice into a substance *Ghoor* unfit for granulation, and of little consequence as an article of export. But in respect to this article it may be confidently asserted that proper encouragement would render it very valuable.

Pepper vine is cultivated in Kamroop, Derungh Bassa doyungh in larger quantity; Bisvanath and other provinces of the kingdom, possibly in no great abundance anywhere although the soil in many parts would seem extremely favorable to its cultivation.

Poppy grows in luxuriance (sic) in most of the lower provinces. The natives however are yet unacquainted with the manufacture of merchantable opium which might be procured in considerable quantity.

Indigo is cultivated in various parts of the kingdom but in very inconsiderable quantity. Encouragement would probably render this a very valuable export.

Mustard seed: the plant is cultivated in great abundance. The seed and pit are articles of export, the latter of universal consumption with in the kingdom.

Tobacco was produced in luxuriance in the lower provinces and of a superior quality in the higher. It was formerly an article of export.

Sooparee (bettle-nut) was produced in great quantity everywhere. The consumption among the inhabitants was enormous, yet it was former an article of export.

Ginger is produced everywhere in abundance. Rice was, and is, produced in very great abundance. It is asserted positively that a scarcity has ever been known to happen from natural causes. The nature of the seasons in Assam confirms the assertion, it might prove an invaluable export in times of famine in Bengal.

(ii) Mineral:

Gold is found in considerable quantity among the lands(?) of Burrampooter and others streams which flow from the northern and southern mountains. It was formerly a source of considerable revenue to the monarch.

Iron might be produced at Bassa doyungh as well as from the Garrows in considerable quantities.

Salt petre was produced everywhere in the upper provinces in considerable quantity and might probably in time prove an article of export.



(iii) Animal:

Lac: the quantity usually exported in favorable times has not been ascertained but we may presume that it was not very inconsiderable from the actual produce which we have lately observed.

Moongah silk seem to offer a most valuable and extensive article of export with proper encouragement, as the several trees on which the worm feeds were cultivated in the utmost profusion throughout the whole extent the kingdom with few exceptions. A coarser kind of silk is produced by worms which feed on the castor oil trees.

Elephant's teeth have always been an article of export and in the present desolated condition of the country might be procured in quantity. Increase of population will necessary diminish the possible quantity of this export.

Rhinoceros, horn was a trifling article of export.

Buffaloe's Hide has not hitherto proved an article of export. Deer's skins, the animal abounds in Assam.

