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**MEDIEVAL NORTHEAST INDIA : POLITY, SOCIETY AND ECONOMY
1200-1750 A.D.**

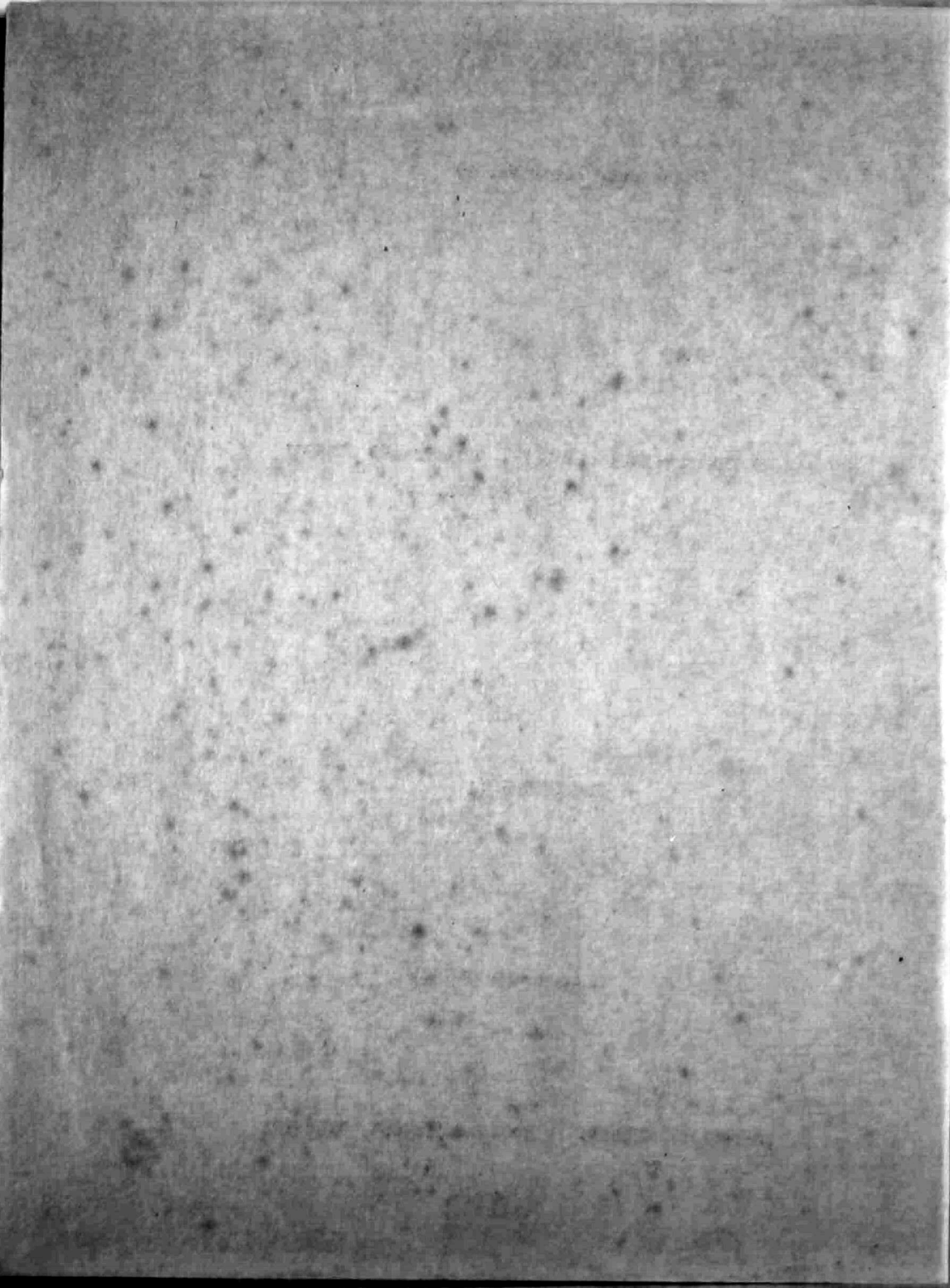
AMALENDU GUHA

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CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, CALCUTTA



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AMALENDU GUHA

August 1978

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PREFACE

This working paper is for limited circulation only and is not to be cited in any form. It is scheduled to be published in a modified form in the forthcoming Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol. I. Meanwhile comments are invited on the present draft so that necessary changes could be incorporated before it goes into final print.

I am indeed grateful to Professors Tapan Raychaudhury, Irfan Habib and Barun De for inducing me to write this paper. Thanks are also due to Professor Sunil Muzsi and Ms. Anjusri Chakraborty for preparing the maps, facing the text.

Anandendu Guha

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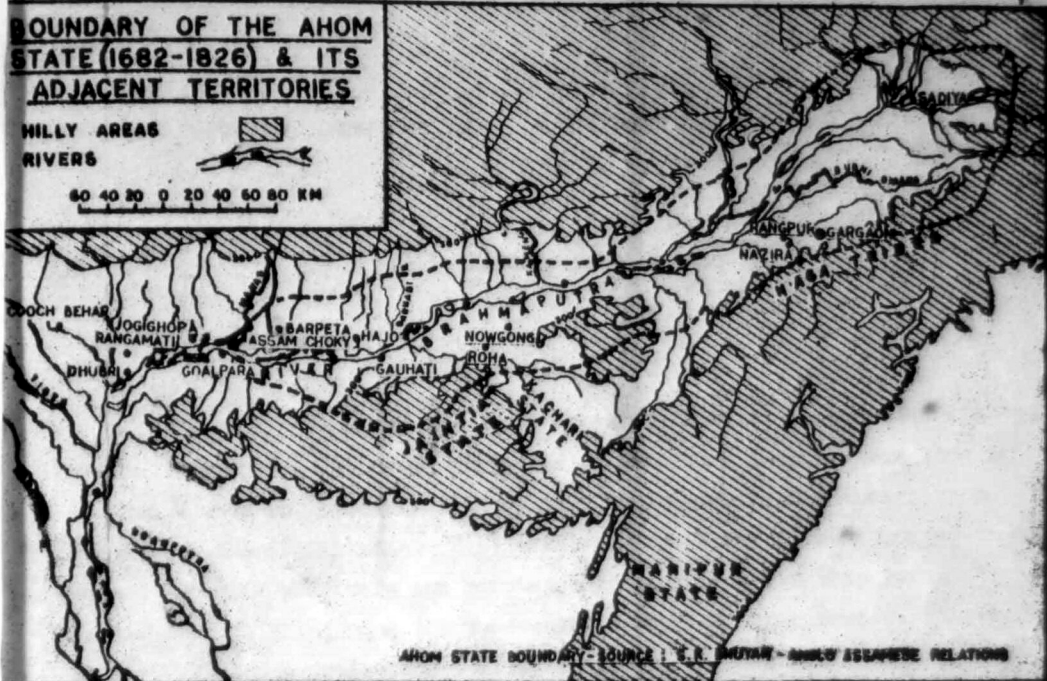


BOUNDARY OF THE AHOM STATE (1682-1826) & ITS ADJACENT TERRITORIES

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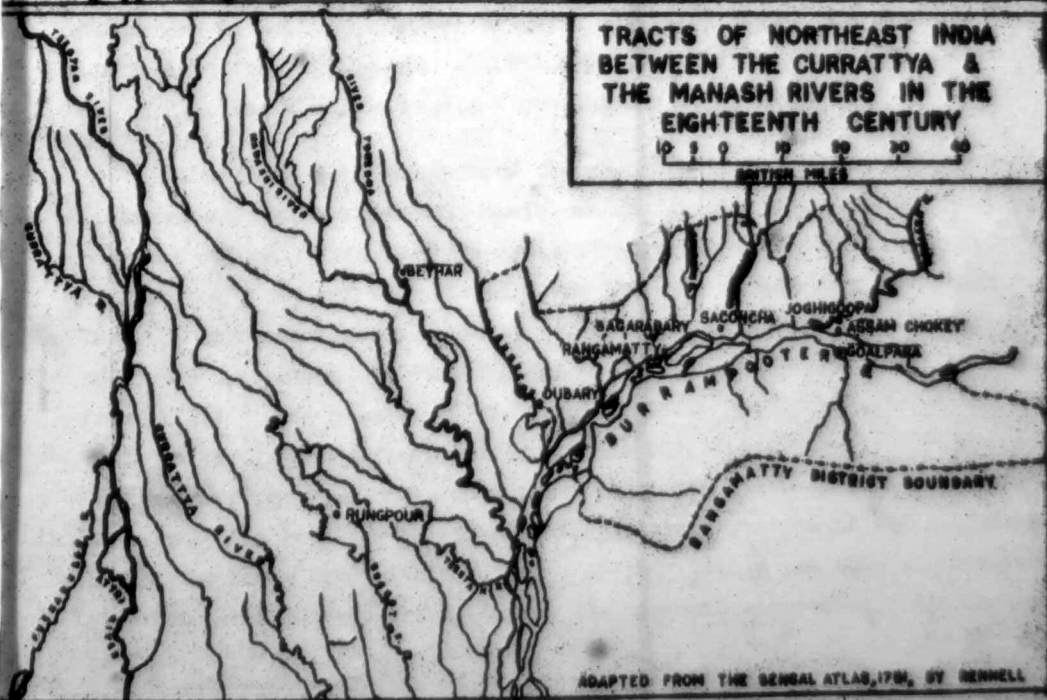
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AHOM STATE BOUNDARY - SOURCE : S. R. BHATTAR - ANNUAL ASSAMESE RELATIONS

TRACTS OF NORTHEAST INDIA BETWEEN THE CURRATTYA & THE MANASH RIVERS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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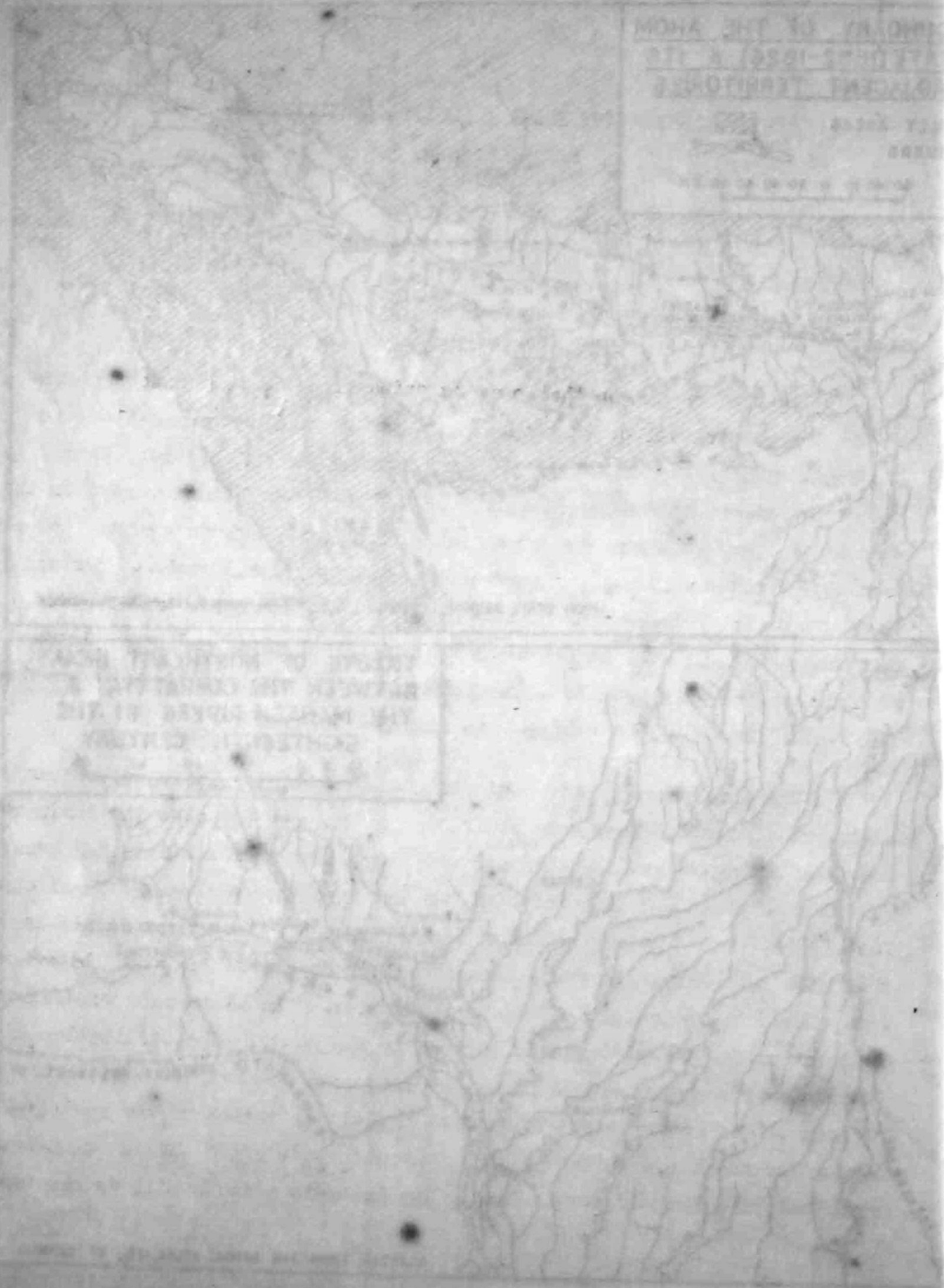


ADAPTED FROM THE BENGAL ATLAS, 1784, BY BIRNELL

BOUNDARY OF THE ACHOM
STATE IN 1851-1852
NORTHWEST TERRITORY

1851-1852

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BOUNDARY OF THE ACHOM
STATE IN 1851-1852
NORTHWEST TERRITORY

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MEDIEVAL NORTHEAST INDIA : POLITY, SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

1200 - 1750 A. D.

I. State and the Rice Economy

Political Setting :

The land of Kamrup that once extended from the easternmost limits of the Brahmaputra valley to the banks of the river Karatoya was long in its ruins when in the early 13th century Turko-Afghan adventurers from Bengal and the migrant Ahom (Tai) settlers from Upper Burma appeared on the scene. No more was there any semblance of a central kingship left. Nor was it to reappear soon during the subsequent centuries under review. Instead there persisted a fragmented political system. Several new tribal state formations as well as a number of petty non-tribal kings and armed land-controllers (bhuyan/bhaumik) - the latter mostly concentrated in the western and central parts of the region - coexisted side by side.

The Ahoms were an advanced plough-using tribe. Their rudimentary state had at its base not only their own settlements but also the subjugated non-Ahom villages, both settled and shifting. The Ahom nobility had domains allotted to them, and at their head was the king chosen from the royal clan. The king appointed select noblemen to important offices and could dismiss them when necessary. In turn, he was himself appointed and could be removed from office by the council of the great nobles. The adult male population owed the obligation of periodic service to the state. The utilization of the manpower pool was organized by the king with the help of a hierarchy of officers. The latter were entitled to exploit a portion of the mobilized labour for their own private gains. The Ahom polity was thus a quasi-feudal structure on a largely tribal base. Its economic aspects will be discussed later.

Of the two other medieval tribal state formations, the Chutiya Kingdom was completely absorbed into the Ahom State by the early 16th century. The Kachari Kingdom too was gradually pushed back by the Ahoms further south-west to a precarious existence, often under conditions of vassalage. At the same time, the westward thrust of the Ahom State was largely at the cost of the bhuyāns. Even as all this was happening in the early 16th century, there emerged another tribal state formation, the Koch Kingdom. In course of the century, it consolidated its power over the entire western part of the region from the Karatoya to the Barnadi, all the time expanding at the cost of the local bhuyāns. In 1563 a Koch army marched to the Ahom capital, Garhgaon, and sacked it. But soon the Kingdom was split into two - Koch-Bihar and Koch-Hajo, the latter co-terminous with the western part of what is today known as Assam. The state of Jaintia that emerged by the 15th century in the Khasi hills and was marginally present in the plains will not be brought much into our present discussion. It was an extremely loose and amorphous tribal polity, more akin to its eastern neighbours in this respect, than to the Ahom Kingdom on whose economic and social formation, we propose to focus. The State of Manipur also remains outside our scope, largely for the same reason; and also because sources for its history deserve detailed scrutiny.

By the time the Koch and the Ahom powers were posited for a confrontation, many of the disintegrated bhuyāns were absorbed as petty officers into the lower echelons of the new machinery, set up for mobilizing the obligatory labour services to the two states. For they constituted an indispensable elite having a formal education in scriptures, mensuration and arithmetic, and also a proficiency in the use of arms. As the bhuyāns did never completely lose their local influence at the grassroots, the important role they played during the 13th-15th centuries deserves a mention. Throughout these years, punctuated by occasional Turko-Afghan raids from Bengal, they continued to wield political authority in and around their respective agricultural estates, singly or through the formation of

confederacies. Now and then a petty ruler, claiming descent from an ancient royal lineage and styling himself as "Kamesvar" or "Kamatesvar", demanded loyalty from them. If the claimant was strong enough, the neighbouring bhuyāns did recognize him as their overlord and paid homage at his court. Otherwise, they remained independent. Chandibar Bhuyan - a 14th-century migrant who 'commanded 80 shields' -- held allegiance, for instance, to Gandharvarai, who, in his turn, was a vassal (chotaraja) of the King of Kamata (Kamesvar).¹ On the other hand, his contemporary Purushottam Das, grandson of a dependent bhuyan commanding a thousand swordsmen, claimed himself to be independent and granted a vailage to a Brahmin.²

Most of the bhuyāns were high-caste migrant adventurers from North India and their descendents; only some were of local descent. Though by and large Kayastha by caste, the bhuyān category did not altogether exclude Brahmins, Daivajnas or Muslims. Their various surnames, such as bhuyān, giri, rāi, dalai (dalapati) and khan, suggest that they represented not merely a status-group but also a class of armed land-controllers. They moved to virgin lands to set up their new homesteads and cultivation; they provided protection to their dependent neighbours against the Ehot and Kachari incursions; and they also played a leading role in the cultural life as well as in the communal dyke-building activities for water-control. They, as a group, dominated the caste-differentiated Assamese-speaking mainstream of the population. The population was then a myriad-tongued tribe-peasant continuum. Except for the Ahoms, the rest of the tribal population in the plains were of Tibeto-Burman stock. The Ahoms belonged to the Sino-Tai linguistic family.

1. Kathā-guru-charita, pp. 9-16. For fuller particulars of this source see Appendix-I; for other sources to be mentioned below, see the Select Bibliography at the end.
2. Rautkuchi copper plate inscription in Prāchyaśāsanāvalī, pp. 138-41.

The eastern and larger part of Koch-Hajo — subjugated by the Mughals but frequently changing hands during the 17th century — was finally annexed by the Ahoms by 1682. The Ahom expansion as far as the river Manas became then a settled fact. It was therefore in course of the 17th century — the century of Ahom Mughal conflicts — that the relative isolation of the region was breached, and the economic impact of the outside world began to be felt. In this changing political setting, the region's overall production activities and trade could not but undergo slow changes in diversity and volume, if not also in quality.

In fact the process of state formation within a tribe could have had started only when it had, to a considerable extent, moved from shifting to permanent cultivation, with or without the use of plough. For, a quantum of surplus was necessary to maintain even a rudimentary state apparatus. The subsequent process of political consolidation over the centuries was coterminous with the twin processes of social consolidation through progressive sanskritization i.e. Hinduization of the tribes and their peasantization and of economic consolidation through market links. This involved not only a degree of upward social mobility into and within the caste society, but also economic changes. The invasion of the plough in pockets of ~~low~~ and digging stick cultures meant an extension of the wet rice (sāli) cultivation at the cost of that of dry rice (ālu / āus) and of the transplantation technique in preference to the broadcasting of seeds. The package changes in the rice economy ensured an increased productivity, thereby giving sustenance to the rising population and to the state apparatus.

Technology of Wet Rice Culture

The prevailing modes of cultivation and their mix were largely a response to the varying ecological conditions. In the rainfall-rich region, liberally dotted with forests and swamps, hunting, fishing and other gathering activities continued to play more than a marginal role. Yet it was the rice economy that really mattered, and it underwent improvements.

Of the two major varieties of rice, āhu was a short-maturing one which was sown broadcast. It needed no standing water and, hence, also no ridges (āli) built into the fields.* Sali was a more productive, long-maturing variety that needed wet conditions and transplantation. Slope being an important factor for consideration in rice culture, wet rice needed such fields —

- (i) as could be flooded artificially from adjacent streams as and when needed, or
- (ii) as could be reduced to a dead level so that it could retain the rain water.

The first was a technique of gravitational irrigation with its applicability limited only to sloping submontane tracts watered by hill streams. It involved the throwing up of dams across the hill streams in their upper reaches and leading the stored-up water to the fields through a network of dug-out channels. The Kacharis were adept in this technique. The existence of such irrigation works in 13th-century Assam appears to have been noticed both by Minhaj-ul-Siraj and the first Ahom settlers.³ The second technique suited the extensive central alluvial flats, made up of clayey soil, once these were cleared of deep-rooted forests. It involved surfacing of the soil and raising of low ridges in a crisscross pattern so that the field was divided into a number of 6 to 10 yards rectangular blocs, and the rain water could be held in the right quantity and let out when needed.

* Low built-in ridges, crisscrossing the rice fields and breaking the monotony of their flatness, are crucial to the wet rice technology. The ridges, are generally not higher than a foot and help retain the water in the fields, as will be explained in the text. Every peasant takes care to raise such low ridges in his field and keep them undisturbed while ploughing. Dykes or high embankments, on the other hand, are collectively-built and managed instruments of general water control, on a big scale. These can also be used as roads. In the 11th century copper-plate inscription of Indrapala, there is a reference to Ksetra-āli meaning field-ridges as well as to brhat-āli meaning big dykes or embankments. — Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol.66, 1897, pp.113-32.

3. Tabaqat-i-Nasiri, pp.762-66; Deodhāi Asam Buranjī, p. 110; Guha Artha Vināna, Vol.9, 1967, pp.144-45.

The grassy banks and islands of the Brahmaputra, being sandy and exposed to annual inundation, were unfit for any kind of permanent cultivation. So were large parts of the undulating plains and submontane tracts where the slope remained an inhibiting factor. Most of these areas were however suited to the growing of āhu culture even after the hoe or the digging stick was replaced by the plough. In the region's agrarian history, improvements did take place over the period, but without driving out the old techniques into total obsolescence. The tribal factor and the given ecology were largely to explain this phenomenon.

In the 13th century, the Ahoms and the non-tribal population in general were associated with the wet rice (gāli) culture of the central plains. Some advanced sections of the tribal population, like the Kacharis, also marginally grew wet rice of another variety in the submontane tracts. This variety was Kharmā āhu, which was irrigated but not always necessarily transplanted. At the same time, all ethnic groups without exception had also a varying interest in the dry āhu culture. In course of the subsequent centuries, the Ahoms played a significant role in widening the base of the wet rice culture of the gāli variety in the undulating plains of eastern Assam. Apparently, the iron implements they had for reclamation and surface-leveilling work were relatively more efficient and abundant than their neighbours'. For they had direct access also to supplies from Upper Burma across the hills. Their use of buffaloes as the major source of animal power, as in Southeast Asia, was another factor that contributed to their efficiency in bringing wastelands under the plough. However their main strength lay in the traditional Tai militia system they shared with their kinsmen in Thailand and Vietnam. Such a militia had to render service to the state for all public purposes in war and peace. Next to defence, the most important function of this militia was to build and maintain an infrastructure for the wet rice economy.

Role of the Militia in Rice Culture :

The militia was employed to reclaim cultivable lands from forests and swamps. These were then systematically settled with the surplus population from older habitations. Hundreds of miles of river embankments, crossed by high raised pathways and joined by smaller bunds graduating down to and connecting the villages and fields, formed a network that helped retain or keep out the inundations. These massive works, built up mainly in course of the 15th-17th centuries, remained unparalleled elsewhere in the region. The land surface was also caused to be levelled up with particular care. "In this country they make the surface of the field and gardens so level" wrote Shihabuddin Talish in the 1660s "that the eye cannot find the least elevation in it up to the extreme horizons".⁴ The reference was obviously to the Ahom part of the region, i.e., eastern Assam where sali accounted for an overwhelmingly major part of the rice production.

In course of the popular Vaishnava movement since the 16th century, a network of monasteries (satra) — these appear to have numbered more than a thousand around 1700 A. D. — came into being. These institutions also took part on their own, and independently, in the reclamation of waste lands for cultivation, while pressing their claims for an exemption of all monks—celebrate or married—from obligatory militia services to the State. The monks evaded such services as and when they could, by paying fines or otherwise. At one stage the State tried to suppress a large section of the monasteries, seize the monks and send them to labour camps to build roads and embankments. In due course, the Ahom state however changed its policy and, during the 17th - 18th centuries, endowed a number of those monasteries with grants of revenue-free waste lands and serfs by way of encouragement to their autonomous growth. The same was the response of the Koch Kings towards the monasteries.^{4a}

4. Gait, A History of Assam, p.141.

4a. Sarma, The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam, pp.180-83.

The Ahom militia organization was so intrinsically integrated with the economy at large that it deserves some elaboration. Originally, each household contributed one militia man (ghar muri e povā). With the exception of the attached serfs, slaves, priests and men of noble birth, the entire male population in the 15-60 age-group was deemed to constitute the militia. They were known as pāiks and, in due course, were organized by gots (units) — each consisting of four adult males and jointly held responsible for one man-year of service to the state. One member of each got was obliged to report for duty, in rotation, at appointed places "for such work as might be required of him, and during his absence from home, the other members were expected to cultivate his land and keep him supplied with food."⁵ In times of an emergency like war, the second and even the third member of a got might be called up, at one and the same time, even to the detriment of their household agriculture.

Each pāik household had access to common lands such as forests, grazing grounds and fisheries. Besides, it held in private occupation three types of land :

- i) homestead and garden lands suited to growing bamboo, areca-nuts, betel-vines and sugarcane, vegetables, fruit-bearing plants, lac, silk, tobacco, jute or some such crop;
- ii) inferior lands suited to fluctuating plough cultivation of āhu rice, mustard-seeds and pulses; and
- iii) wet rice lands.

5. Gait, p.239.

For the first two categories of landholding, the pāik had no obligation to the state. Subject to a degree of clam control, homestead and garden lands were treated as private property. Inferior lands going periodically waste were hardly claimed as permanent private property under the given conditions of land abundance. A household could get hold of as much of such lands for use as it could manage. On the other hand, all wet rice lands were deemed to belong to the state. As against his service obligations to the state, the pāik was entitled to enjoy a demarcated plot of wet rice land, free of all taxes and subject to redistribution from time to time. Since the 17th century, the size of this allotment used to be, generally, 2.66 acres; and in Kamrup where the average quality of wet rice land was inferior, four acres. Incidentally Kamrup, representing new conquests in the 17th century, was the westernmost district of the Ahom dominions.

Even as late as the early 16th century, this basically tribal system of manpower utilization was not sufficiently coercive and, hence, had its loose ends. "Some Ahoms complied with, some did not. Only the conquered subjects", a chronicler lamented, "perform whatever work is given to them".⁶ It was in the reign of Pratap Singha (1603-41 A.D.) that a degree of coercion and sophistication was introduced into the reorganized militia. It was then split horizontally into a number of functional/localitywise divisions called khel, each with a hierarchy of officers — the lowest among them holding the charge of twenty gots. Under the reorganized system, each individual pāik served the state for a stipulated period of three months in the year. Pāika of good birth were not expected to do manual labour or to fight as common soldiers; they therefore rendered

6. Sātsari Asam Buranji, p.21.

The Ahom rulers introduced the practice of writing chronicles (buranji) for record. Many of these, written in Tai or Assamese language, are now available in edited, printed versions.

non-manual services, in accordance with their respective skills, aptitudes and status. Separate functional khels were also organized for such non-manual services. Craftsmen contributed, in lieu of labour, a fixed portion of their respective products to the royal treasury. Again, some of the khels were engaged in cultivating crown lands or working in royal karkhanas and granaries. Tribal cultivators of the marches, not using the plough, were not within the purview of, or integrated into, the system.

This system worked in such manner that one-fourth to one-third of the militia were always available in readiness for such work as might be required of them. Since ministers and officers were not salaried, they were provided during their tenure as their perquisites with cultivable lands and a quota of servitors (likchou) from the pāik units they commanded. So miserable were the conditions of these likchaus as unpaid labour for a limited period that they often preferred to pay their officers heavily in cash or kind to escape the ordeal. Besides, the bigger officers - all noble men - had their ancestral estates, slaves and serfs which were their private feudal properties. The traditional practice of land grants to Brahmins, temples and religious institutions in the region was initially discontinued by the Ahoms. However from the 17th century onwards, they too fell in line. They created, on an extensive scale, large private feudal properties in favour of the above-mentioned categories as they had done earlier in favour of the nobility in office. In that process, a sizeable portion of the pāiks were transferred from the state's jurisdiction to that of the lords temporal and spiritual, so that the latter could exact labour-rent directly from them. Private feudal properties also existed in the Koch territories, later preserved also by the Mughals.

Details of the militia system as it functioned in the non-Ahom territories are not available. In the Koch and Kachari Kingdoms - and also in the neighbouring Kingdoms of Jaintia and Manipur - a somewhat simpler system of exacting compulsory militia service from the subject was resorted to. But the basic quasi-feudal nature of the system remained the same, with a striking resemblance to similar systems in medieval Southeast Asia.⁷

The Mughal Impact

With the imposition of the Mughal revenue administration on the Koch territories and the increasing role of money in economic life since the close of the 16th century, profound changes began to take place not only there but also in the adjacent Ahom Kingdom. The Mughal administration demanded from the paik allotments revenue in cash in lieu of the traditional militia service. From a larger part of Koch-Hajo, the Ahoms ousted the Mughals but basically retained their land revenue system. In the Ahom territories, relatively affluent paiks had already been looking forward to commutation of their service obligation into kind or cash payment. This was increasingly conceded to, though with some reluctance.

Only a manpower census, and no land survey, used to take place from time to time in the Ahom state. The earliest reference in local chronicles to such a census is to one that dates as far back as 1510 A.D.⁸ It was not the custom of the Ahoms to take any land tax from the cultivators but "in every house one man out of three", as Shihabuddin Talish observed, had to render service to the Rajah. "If this country were administered like the Imperial dominions" he estimated "it is very likely that forty to forty-five lakhs of rupees would be collected from the revenue paid by the raiyats, the price of the elephants caught in the jungles and other sources."⁹ This way of thinking had not left the Ahoms unaffected. Impressed by the Mughal

7. Virginia Thompson, Thailand: the New Siam (New York, 1941), pp.292 ff.; Dang Nghien Van, "An outline of the Thai in Vietnam", Vietnam Studies, Vol.8, 1972, pp. 188-93.

8. Gait, p.86.

9. Ibid., p.143.

land measurement system, they started a country-wide detailed land survey and almost completed it during the years 1684-1751. In that process, attempts were made to detect taxable wet rice lands held in excess of the prescribed paik allotments and to explore new avenues of taxation, while keeping the militia system basically in tact. Surveyors were brought from Koch-Bihar and Bengal. Selective commutation of labour service obligations for cash was also in progress. By 1663 pineapple and tobacco, both contributions from the New World, were under cultivation in the region. Both had potentialities as cash crops.

By the end of the 16th century, some types of land had definitely acquired a saleable value in the western parts of the region, though land sales were still rather unusual. The author of Kathā-guru-charita casually refers to three such transactions related to the purchase of homestead plots taking place in the 16th century.¹⁰ In the next century, the fact of land purchases actually taking place in the same area is corroborated by several extant documents. Three of them - dated 1667 A.D., 1685 A.D. and 1723 A.D. respectively - strictly belong to our period.¹¹ The first is a sanad issued by Emperor Aurangzeb in favour of two temple priests of Pargam Pandu. Though not a sale deed, it mentioned the market price of the land donated. The second and third were actual land transaction deeds, in each of which a high-ranking nobleman in office featured as the purchaser. The third document recorded the purchase of a 9-acre plot, suited to both orchard and rice cultivation, at the price of rupees twenty-five from

10. Kathā-guru-charita, pp. 87, 142 and 263.

11. Bhuyan, Annals of the Delhi Badshahate, p.18 and Copper-plate inscriptions no.50 and no.28, Record Room, Assam Secretariat, Shillong/Gauhati.

some vaillagers of Maligaon, Pargana Dehar. The place of transaction, names of witnesses present and boundary demarcations were mentioned in the document. All the places mentioned in the above documents, however, related to western Assam - the present district of Kamrup to be more precise. It appears that in eastern Assam private land rights, even when recognized as saleable, remained inseparably linked with over-riding clan and community rights down to the British days beginning 1826.

II. The Caste-Society and Division of Labour

Ecology and Society

Throughout the historical period the Brahmaputra -- the region's life line flowing between soft, sandy banks -- was also ruthless to its vicinities all along its course. Though favoured with westerly winds, its navigation in the rainy season was hazardous, uncertain the dangerous for boats other than canoes, because of floating trees and the difficult tracking along its jungle-covered and crushing banks. Village settlements followed therefore a linear pattern along the banks of its tributaries rather than nucleating on the banks of the Brahmaputra itself, except for a few sites protected by natural rocks from its vagaries. Clusters of hamlet-type settlements were, more often than not, separated from each other by jungles and swamps, infested with wild animals including herds of buffaloes, elephants and deer. Under the circumstances, if political developments were at a level different from those in the north Indian plains, society and economy too had their distinguishing features.

The nucleated village of the classical north and south India type, with village servants integrated with a dominant caste-group within it through Jaimani relations, was conspicuously absent in northeast India. An attempt was made by King Pratap Singha (1603-41 A.D) to found in eastern

Assam new villages settled with several caste groups including artisans.^{11a} The attempt however apparently failed to give a different direction to the village settlement pattern. The brotherhoods that developed on the basis of functional khels, institutionalized by the same king for administrative convenience, largely inhibited the growth or autonomy of village communities. Only in some pockets of western Assam could one come across a semblance of big multi-caste villages -- that, too, not frequently -- and never were they oriented to jajmani relations.

In general, caste rules were less rigorous, less specialized, less elaborate and less inhibiting in this region than elsewhere. For example, there was no taboo against Brahmin women's participation in the sowing and harvesting operations in rice fields or in weaving. Many of the Brahmins were agriculturists; though, for the ritually inferior act of ploughing, they had to depend on others. The caste society was open-ended at its bottom, liberally admitting not only individual entrants but also whole tribes -- Koch, Ahom and Chutiya, for instance -- as new castes through proselytization. The Vaishnava monasteries played a significant role in this respect. This steady process of detribalization over the centuries also meant, inter alia, the proselytes' adoption of mud-plinth dwellings in place of pile-houses, of the caste society's dominant language in place of a tribal dialect and of the plough in place of the hoe or the digging stick. Tribalism nevertheless died hard since fresh groups of tribal hillsmen continued to come down and settle in the plains, thereby somewhat neutralizing the process.

It is difficult to say to what extent trade, crafts and money circulation prevailed in the region during the 13th-15th centuries. No local coins of the period, if any, are extant; the only coins extant are those minted and left behind by the Turko-Afghan raiders. Nor are there inscriptional references to coinage or to the use of money to fall upon.

^{11a}. Deodhai Asam Buranj, p.130.

It is highly probable that imported cowries (conch-shells) continued to be in circulation. For we find cowries being referred to as money in an earlier inscription.¹² Barter nevertheless remained the main form of exchange, alongside of the use of cowries and Bengal coins coming into the region through trade.

Village self-sufficiency in a total sense was a myth even in those times. Salt had to come from the brine springs of the surrounding hills and / or from coastal Bengal. Because of varying ecological conditions, there was a degree of micro-regional specialization in respect of crops like cotton, sugar-cane, mustard-seeds, lac and silk. Elephant tusks, buffalo horns, rock-salt, incense and iron were, for the most part, products of the foothills and the hills; so was raw cotton. Merchant-heroes participating in long-distance, riverine (and sea) trade with boat-loads of black pepper, (pippali), incense, ginger, mustard-seeds, cumin seeds and nutmegs etc. provided a popular theme for the 16th-century Assamese literature. This suggests existence of such trade in a near past. We learn from Minhaj that a regular supply of horses used to reach Bengal from Tibet (and Bhutan) via Kamrup in the 13th century.¹³ Trade links between eastern Assam and Upper Burma, and probably also south China, were maintained across the hills throughout the 13th-15th centuries.

Money and Trade

From the late 16th century onwards, information is more detailed about the region's economic conditions; no doubt is any more left about some growth taking place in trade and crafts and some advance made towards monetization and specialization. The first batch of local coins of our

12. Tozpur rock inscription dated C.829 A.D., Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, vol. 3, pp.185-92.

13. Barua, Studies in Early Assamese Literature, pp. 93-97; Tabaqat-i-Nasiri, pp. 567-68.

period were gold coins issued by an Ahom King in 1543 A.D. No Ahom coins were further issued during the century; but the Koch Kings since 1555 A.D., and the Kachari and Jaintia Kings thereafter, took to regular coinage filling in the vacuum. The Ahoms also resumed minting again in the mid-17th century. By 1663 their currency consisted of gold coins, silver rupees and cowries. By the end of the century half-rupee and quarter-rupee silver coins and by 1750 also one-eighth rupee and one-sixteenth rupee coins were extensively in circulation throughout the region. The standard Ahom rupee-coin weighed two-fifth of an English ounce; and, in the absence of a copper coinage, cowries met the needs of petty trade. The rapid increase in money supply from several sources indicated that the demand for media of exchange and trade, both intra-regional and inter-regional, were increasing over the years 1500-1750 A.D.

Some idea of the trade conditions could be derived from Kathā-guru-charita, since a number of 16th-century Vaishnava saints, whose biographies this book contains, had participated in trade as youngmen. The author classified merchants (mudai) into three categories -- (i) shopkeepers dealing in gold and jewells, (ii) those dealing in a variety of silk and cotton fabrics and (iii) those dealing in commonplace articles like salt and Khār (an alkaline substitute for salt, prepared from vegetable ash). The first two categories dealt evidently in luxury goods and the third, in necessaries. Big or small, the merchants of the region were men of modest means by north Indian standards. The scale of operations, casually mentioned in this source, was of the order of rupees one lakh or so in several cases; in one place, a credit capital of Rs.4 lakhs is mentioned in course of a story. No particular caste specialized in trade. There were inter alia some Kayastha and Brahmin traders as well. ¹⁴

14. Kathā-guru-charita, pp. 65, 142, 241, 349, 492-93.

Traders used to form temporary partnerships to trade in distant markets with boat-loads of local products and returning with a cargo for sale. On completing the return voyage and sales, the profits were shared and the partnership was dissolved. Commodities involved in trading were mustard-seeds; areca-nuts; betel leaves; ornamental umbrellas made of bamboo and takaupat (leaves of a plant of the palm family); knives with ornamental handles; salt; silk; black pepper; elephant tusks and gold. Generally, the first three items procured from Koch-Hajo were offered for the remaining items of the above list obtainable in the Ahom Kingdom.¹⁵

Traders sometimes specialized in a single commodity like salt or areca-nuts. To some extent, specialization in the production of a commodity was achieved also localitywise. Concentration of betel-vine and areca-nut orchards in the village of Kupajhar and its vicinities, and Paralahāt serving the area as a marketing centre, were noted in Kathā-guru-charita. In all local hats, which were weekly or bi-weekly markets, one could purchase betel-leaves, areca-nuts, earthen wares, piece-goods etc., but presumably not a very wide range of goods. Surprisingly, there was only a small daily bazaar on a narrow street in the Ahom capital of Garhgaon in the 1660s; and the only sellers who sat there, as Shihabuddin observed, were betel-leaf sellers. However, women vendors, amongst others, brought head-loads of various provisions for sale to Nazirahāt, located outside the city gates. This we learn from Kathā-guru-charita.¹⁶

Village potters used to go out with boat-loads of their earthen wares for barter. Some villagers in their old age eked out a living by making a variety of bamboo baskets, fishing appliances and containers and by locally bartering these for salt, oil, areca-nuts, rice and such other

15. Ibid, 82-89; Vanshīgopāladevar Charitra, pp. 29-30.

16. Kathā-guru-charita, pp. 65, 82-87 and 197; Gait, p. 150.

necessaries of life. The author of Kathā-guru-charita also noted occasional sales by them of vegetables, mustard oil and wood fuel.¹⁷ Thus, for the most part, exchange was intra-local on a petty scale and at a peddling level, within the limitations of a basically barter and cowrie economy. In such an economy the sellers were often themselves also the producers or gatherers of the goods sold. When not, they generally had their goods procured directly from the producers, in villages accessible by boats rather than through intermediaries. Besides, big or small, the traders did not normally snap their links with agriculture.^{17a} Bullock carts were not in use; nor were bullock caravans.

Let us take the career of Bhabananda Kalita (b. circa 1495 A.D.) who was described as a bar-sadāgar or big merchant. He was born in an affluent agricultural household consisting of fourteen members, including a bondsman or two. Jointly with his uncle, he owned a large boat and several heads of cattle and buffaloes. While migrating to a new village, with all their moveable properties, young Bhabananda and his uncle lost everything - even their family - in a boat-wreck. However, in course of his assisting a betel-leaf vendor in a hāt and, later, of participation in that trade, Bhabananda made a small fortune of 640 cowries (normally equal to half-a-rupee). Through gambling this was augmented to rupees four. In partnership with a friend he then took to goat-breeding and further improved his pecuniary position. In partnership with six friends, he now took to riverine trade. Gradually he became a boat-owning merchant dealing mainly in mustard-seeds. Based on the Koch Kingdom, he used to travel as far as and beyond the frontiers to trade with men from the Garo Hills, Bhutan, Mughal Bengal and the Ahom Kingdom. His evasion of the Koch customs duties having been once detected, he was finally granted tax-free privileges

17. Kathā-guru-charita, pp. 123, 244, 250, 307 and 331.

17a. This is the impression one gathers from Kathā-guru-charita. See particularly p. 424 for Bhabananda's interest in agriculture; also p. 536.

all over the kingdom. In his old age, he was well-settled in his farm-house, with agriculture carried on by bonded or slave labour and his resources committed to the cause of the Vaishnava movement.¹⁸

We know also of other enterprising Assamese merchants who took their trading boats as far as Dacca or followed an overland trade-route across the Jaintia hills to Sylhet to trade with Bengal in the early 17th century. The Assamese diplomatic envoys, visiting Tripura thrice during 1709-15 A.D., noted important trade-centres and local produces they found on their route — obviously with an eye towards trade promotion. Their written accounts are extant.¹⁹ A chain of foothills marts — such as Nagahāt, Borhāt, Kocharihāt, Rahahāt, Gobhahāt, Banihāt, and Phulagurihāt — facilitated regular trade between the plains of the region and the hills of northeast India. Raw Cotton and iron of the hills, in particular, were exchanged for rice, dried fish and cotton and silk fabrics of the plains, and also for bell-metal and brazen utensils.

There were regular trade relations between Mughal India and the Ahom Kingdom, except when such relations remained suspended on diplomatic grounds. The Mughal administration had an insatiable demand for live elephants and agar (acquilaria agallocha) or aloe-wood. The normal agency for procuring elephants was, however, not the traders. For elephant-catching was a highly labour-intensive, sophisticated enterprise, necessarily organized at the state level. A golden-hued silk variety of Assam, MUGA, was an article of trade in Bengal as well as the Coromandel and Malabar coasts in the early^{17th} century. Every year in normal times, wrote Shihabuddin, quantities of aloe-wood, pepper, spikenard, musk, gold and a variety of silk were offered in exchange of salt, saltpetre, sulphur and several other products of Mughal India at the Ahom-Mughal check-post.²⁰

18. Ibid, pp. 79-101 and p. 424.

19. Doodhāi Assam Buranji, pp. 120; Tripurā Buranji, pp. 21-23 and 29-33. The Assamese envoys noted the sale of tobacco leaves in a market centre (ganja) in Tripura in 1711 A.D. Tobacco as a local product in Central Assam around 1615 A.D. is mentioned in Doodhāi Assam Buranji, p. 110.

20. Gait, p. 144.

The composition of the Mughal-Ahom trade could be roughly comprehended for the first half of the 18th century from the earliest available estimates, based on the customs check-post returns of the year 1808/9²¹. These are tabulated below with a caution that the Ahom kingdom was not even half as populous then as it had been around 1750. Nevertheless, the figures are valid for our purpose in their ordinal magnitudes.

EXPORTS FROM BENGAL INTO AHOM STATE			IMPORTS FROM AHOM STATE INTO BENGAL		
QUANTITY		VALUE	QUANTITY		VALUE
(1000 maunds)		(Rs.1000)	(1000 maunds)		(Rs.1000)
Salt	35.0	192.5	Stick-lac	10.0	35.0
Ghee (clarified butter)	1.0	1.6	Raw cotton	7.0	35.0
Fine pulse	-	0.8	Muga silk	0.1*	28.9
Sugar and spices	-	2.0	Mustard-seeds	15.0	20.0
Copper	-	4.8	Ivory		6.5
Red lead and paints	-	1.5	Bell-metal vessels (and iron hoes)		2.1
Stone beads, cereals, pearls and jewells	-	8.0	Black pepper and Long pepper	0.1	0.8
European glassware, cutlery & woollens	-	2.5	Indian madder		0.5
Muslin	-	10.0	Thaikal (?) fruit		0.1
Other luxury fabrics	-	4.5	Slaves (100 persons)		2.0
		<u>228.2</u>			<u>130.0</u>
Cowries		0.1	Gold and Silver		97.4
		<u>228.3</u>			<u>228.3</u>

* 140 maunds including 75 mds of Muga cloth (dhoti).

21. Francis Hamilton, An Account of Assam, pp. 45-46.

The trade pattern, as indicated above, and by Shihabuddin earlier, suggests that the merchandise trade surplus was generally in favour of Mughal India. In other words, the bullion inflow from Europe into India did not enter into the Ahom dominions. Secondly, salt accounted for an overwhelmingly larger part of the imports into the Ahom State. Around 1750, the annual salt imports from Bengal were about 120 thousand maunds. ²²

Unlike the trade with Bengal, the region's trade with Tibet and Bhutan was favourable, the outstanding balances being settled with gold and silver. The latter countries offered rock-salt, woollens, gold dust, horses, yak-tails (chomar), musk and Chinese silks in exchange for lac, dried fish, cotton and silk fabrics, and perhaps, also rice and iron. The bulk of this caravan trade was between the Ahom kingdom and Lhasa and was negotiated at a place in the foothills. The total value of this trade was estimated at rupees two lakhs for the year 1809. ²³

The range of trading activities at various levels, as surveyed above, was extremely small because of two serious limitations : (1) the surplus largely taking the form of labour-rent / rent-in-kind for direct appropriation by the ruling class and (ii) the household consumption needs of rice, cloth and oil being almost entirely satisfied by production within the household itself. There was no organized grain market, nor was there a vertically and horizontally organized chain of intermediaries to intervene in the market. "The inhabitants store in their houses one year's supply of food of all kinds, and" wrote Shihabuddin "are under no necessity to buy or sell any eatables." In March 1662 the invading Mughal army found in the capital city of Garhgaon one to ten thousand maunds of rice stored in each of about 170 granaries, all presumably belonging to the state and the rich nobles. ²⁴

22. Gait, p.217.

23. Francis Hamilton, pp.73-74; Baharistan-i-Ghaybi, p.677.

24. Gait, pp.134 and 150.

Yet under the Mughal impact things were surely changing. We find in three extant copper-plate charters, dated 1739, 1743 and 1755 A.D. respectively, normal prices being quoted for a range of food articles like rice, pulses, clarified butter (ghco), salt, oil, arcca-nuts, betel-leaves, ginger, milk, jaggery (gur), and black-pepper as well as incense and earthen vessels for regular future purchases to be made by certain temples.²⁵

All said, one has to note that big bankers, insurers, sarrafs, brokers and all that paraphernalia of a developed money economy were conspicuously absent in the region even by 1750, in contrast to what one found in contemporary Mughal India.

Crafts and Technology

Because of the limited growth of trade, the devision of labour — both in terms of the number of castes and in terms of the actual occupational specialization — was extremely stunted and remained more or less so until the end of our period. Weaving and spinning were not caste-specific professions, and professional weavers were not many. There was no separate oilmen's caste either. Weaving, oil-crushing, rice-pounding, basket-making and a number of other crafts were carried on largely within the households. It was only in Kamrup that one could come across a village or two entirely settled by oilmen or weavers; but they too had agriculture as a secondary occupation.

The Kalita caste, essentially peasant in orientation, permitted its members also to form diverse occupational groups such as those of wheel-using potters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, bell-metal artisans, carpenters and boat-makers, and weavers. The groups tended to become sub-castes, but finally did not. Among the despised castes reduced to untouchability were the Hirās who

25. Prāchyaśhāsānavali, pp. T-45-47, 177-80 and 184.

fashioned earthen pots without using the wheel; the Brittials who were goldsmiths; and the Nadiāls who were net-using fishermen. The Moriās -- Muslin settlers originally coming as prisoners of war -- were braziers, making utensils out of brass-sheets; they were looked down because of their addiction to drinking. Artisans and fishermen were not necessarily delinked from agriculture.

It was but natural that in a timber-rich region, the art of carpentry would be highly skilled. The timber palace at Garhgaon built by 12,000 men in one year, according to Shihabuddin, impressed him for its exquisite wood-work.²⁶ The numerous locally-built war-boats of the Assamese also impressed the Mughals for their agility. The technology employed in boat-making was however primitive. Large clinker-built sailing boats were difficult to ply on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Hence it was the dug-out canoe with easy access to both that was perfected for use in local waters.

The traditional boat-building technique, surviving till the recent times, deserves a mention here. Roughly hollowed logs, with their insides scraped off until the thickness of the outer skin was reduced to about an inch and a quarter, were smeared with liquid mud and were placed inverted over a line of burning embers. Thus subjected to a steaming process and softened, the boat in making was widened by insertion of thwarts. If it split in the process -- and usually it did -- the rent was patched with a piece of wood fastened in by clamps. In this process boats with a width of six to seven feet and a length of sixty feet could be built, with a maximum burthen of 30-35 tons.

No mills were used for producing oil at the household level. Two flat boards and a stone-loaded small beam were all that was used for the purpose. Only the professional oilmen -- not many in number -- used

26. Gait, p. 150.

the cattle - powered mill. Such a mill was also used for sugarcane crushing. The dominant technology in weaving did not differ much from what commonly prevailed elsewhere in India.

Mineral production was an important economic activity. Gold used to be obtained from river sands by members of the Sonowal (gold-washer) Khel — a multi-caste guild-working in groups. In Shihabuddin's times, ten to twelve thousand Sonowals were engaged in gold-washing, and they paid to the Rajah a tola of inferior gold per head per year, which fetched a price of rupees eight to nine. All the four alternative methods employed in gold-washing involved a tedious process.²⁷

So were the methods of manufacturing salt. There was a chain of brine springs along the hill ranges close to the foothills. At these places wells were dug to a considerable depth. Joints of large bamboos, opened out so as to resemble canoes, were filled with brine and were placed side by side over a very long water-filled earthen trough used as a boiler. Wood fuel was burnt for the purpose. In this rude way, the brine in the bamboo joints was evaporated until salt was formed. This salt was more expensive than imported Bengal salt.²⁸

Close to the brine spring sites, there were also beds of clay and iron ore which were worked heavily in the medieval times. Mining was carried on often to the depth of twenty-four feet to obtain this clay iron. It was then cleansed of its impurities by washing and was finally melted in small clay furnaces. In a working team, for every five men engaged in smelting there would be about five times the number for preparing the ore and charcoal. The whole group was headed by a master craftsman (ojhā) who put the ore and fuel into the furnace and drew out the lump iron from it. Assamese furnaces were less efficient than those in use in the Khasi Hills.

27. Ibid; p. 143; Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol.7, 1838, pp.621-28.

28. Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol.5, 1836, p.208; Gait, p.142.

worked by double bellows.²⁹ The iron and iron manufactures from Jaintia and other parts of the Khasi Hills had a big market in medieval Assam.

While technology in general was backward, metal working in smithies was not so. Expert Muslim artisan recruits from Mughal India were organized into a separate Khel or guild. Metal-casting processes were used for making articles of gold, silver, bronze, bell-metal, brass and iron. According to Shihabuddin, the Ahoms cast excellent matchlocks, and made first-rate gunpowder and artillery pieces. So was the opinion of Tavernier. He however wrongly credited Assam with the discovery of gunpowder and guns. In fact, fire arms and gunpowder were introduced in Assam in the early 16th century.³⁰ The royal Karkhanas in eastern Assam, apart, there was one village of metal workers in Kanrup, Sarthebari, that was known for its skill in metal casting. The impact of Mughal India facilitated the introduction of some new crafts like brass casting, tailoring and the manufacture of rose perfumes and granulated sugar.

Many artisans were engaged in the royal Karkhanas. Others worked to private orders with raw materials handed in. The Katha-guru-charita introduces us to an indebted and poor weaver who charged a piece-rate of eighty corries per cubit of cloth woven, with yarn supplied by the customer. A little pilferage of the customer's yarn was also part of his practice. Later, on the advice of a Vaishnava preceptor, he stopped pilfering and became known as an honest, hard-working weaver. Soon, freed of all debts, he became affluent providing small loans to others. There were also more affluent master weavers (e.g. one described in the 16th century as tantri-kula-kamala, i.e., a lotus in the guild of weavers) counted amongst the patrons of literateurs and religious reformers.³¹ Weavers and other

29. Robinson, pp.34-35; Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol.25, 1857, pp.330 ff.

30. Gait, pp. 94-95 and 148.

31. Katha-guru-charita, p.393; colophon of Ananta Kandali in Bhagavata-purana cited by Neog, Shrishri Shankaradeva (Gauhati, 3rd ed., 1958), p.114.

artisans had often their respective guilds and guild-masters (dalai/ojha/maral). Journeyman were known as pali.

To sum up, the uneven development of technology over a range of crafts stemmed from a semi-tribal economic base, a small quantum of surplus in circulation and a relative scarcity within the region of basic metals like iron. A minimal use had to be made of whatever iron was available for purposes other than those of weapon-making. As a result, simple bamboo and wooden implements continued to be used in most crafts and agriculture, while manual skill was raised to a high level of perfection to achieve the ends. Natural factors also came in the way. Any kind of wheeled carriages was not in use because the heavy rains for about eight months in the year made the roads unfit for their use. The region being earthquake-prone, there was no appreciable development in the art of building with bricks; nor was the ancient art of building with sculptured stone-slabs appreciably revived.

III. Population and Urban Centres

The size of the population at different points of time until 1872 is anybody's guess. However from around 1500 to 1770 A.D., one comes across definite signs of a demographic growth in the region, in the wake of improvements and expansion of the rice economy. This was evident from the continuous attempts made by the state and the Vaishnava monasteries (satra) at setting up new villages in areas remote and desolate. Surplus population was drawn from older habitations to these new villages. Other indications of the growth were to be found in an increasing adoption of labour-intensive cultivation methods and a steady flow of in-migration. Under the given conditions of land-abundance, the region nevertheless continued to remain population-poor in absolute terms.

The growth trend, that was so obvious for a long time until 1770 in the Ahom territories, was halted and totally reversed during the next half century. There was a terrible depopulation in course of the Civil War years, 1770-1809, when half the population was wiped out.³² Again, the atrocities committed by the Burnese occupation forces during the years 1817-1825 further reduced the remaining numbers by one-third or so.³³ The census that followed British annexation of the Ahom territories in 1826 yielded in that year a count of only 7 to 8 lakhs, half of this concentrated in Kanrup lying west of the Barnadi.³⁴ Allowing for gaps, this figure could be revised to one million. Finally, the official population return for the same area in 1872 was less than 1.5 millions, even including some 40,000 born outside the province. Keeping all these facts as well as observed variations in the size of the Ahom militia in view, and presumably working backwards from the 1826 bench-mark, local historians have estimated the mid-18th century population of the area at 2.5 millions.³⁵ This sounds reasonable, if not a little on the lower side.

Other methods could also be tried for our purpose, calculating on the basis of the militia size. In the reign of Pratap Singha (1603-41), the area lying between the Barnadi and the Manas, i.e., the district of Kanrup, was not yet included within the Ahom territories. The numerical strength of his army was estimated by the author of Bādshāh Nāmah at one hundred thousand foot, one thousand elephants and a large fleet. On another occasion, the author of Baharistan-i-Ghaybi estimated it at three hundred thousand foot, 180 elephants and four thousand war-boats.³⁶

32. Buranjī-vivēka-ratna (Ms), no pagination.

33. By half, according to the Cambridge History of India, Vol.5, p.558.

34. Dhokial-Phukan, pp.74-75.

35. Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826, pp.1-2.

36. Baharistan-i-Ghaybi, Vol.2, p.448; Blochman, Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol.41, 1872, p.55.

The wide difference between these two estimates of Pratap Singha's army strength could be largely resolved by referring to the fact that the proportion of the available adult manpower pool actually called up (i.e., the effectives) could vary in accordance with the exigencies of circumstances. Besides, on the latter occasion, Pratap Singha's own forces were joined also by the displaced soldiers of Koch-Hajo.

Assuming that one paik per got (of four members) was called up on the first occasion, and further that at least five thousand paiks were there with the elephants and the fleet, the relevant adult male population (in the 15-60 age-group) could be derived as 4.2 lakhs. It was most likely that, on the second occasion, i.e., the one noted in Baharistan-i-Ghaybi, two paiks per got were called up. On this assumption and a further one that there were some five thousand paiks posted with the elephants and the fleet, the relevant adult male population could be derived as 6.1 lakhs. In yet another estimate contained in the Akhabarat-i-darbar-i-Mubala, dated 10 December 1669, the combined strength of the infantry and cavalry under the command of the Ahoms was put at about one lakh.³⁷ The area of recruitment involved was still the same, but the total population must have undergone a fall meanwhile due to the lingering Ahom-Mughal hostilities and the exceptionally severe drought of 1665. Assuming that only one paik per got was called up in this case, our estimate of the total adult male population for 1669 is four lakhs.

At this stage, by using a multiplier of 4, on the basis of the observed ratio between the total adult male population (in 15-60 age-group) and the over-all total population in underdeveloped countries like India, we get 1.68 and 2.44 millions, respectively, as alternative population estimates for about 1615-1620, and 1.60 millions for 1669. For all these estimates, the territorial coverage was the same; the Ahoms had not yet

37. Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, IV, 1915, p. 189n.

annexed Kamrup. A further clarification may not be out of place here. The King, in theory, could call up even three paiks per got in an emergency, but in fact he would have hardly dared do so for fear of a consequent total collapse of the agrarian economy due to manpower shortage.

Assamese chronicles provide us with clues for an exercise in population estimates also for a period when Kamrup was an integral part of the Ahom State. In c. 1711 A.D. King Rudra Singha (1696-1714) was seriously considering an invasion of Bengal. The militia register of his State at that time revealed that 260 thousand paiks could be mobilized if the combatants (kānri) alone were called up; 360 thousand paiks, if the non-combatants (chamūā) i.e., men meant for non-manual services, too, were called up; and 400 thousand paiks, if the quota of auxiliary forces contributed by the vassal chiefs were also counted.³⁸ According to one chronicle, two paiks per got were alerted on this occasion.³⁹ Given the methodology worked out above, three alternative possibilities regarding population estimates follow, which are tabulated below :

c. 1711 :	In	Units	Million
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Paiks Called Up	0.26	0.36	0.40
Adult Male Population	0.52	0.72	0.80
Total Population*	2.08	2.88	3.20

* Adult male population multiplied by 4.

Quite obviously, the estimate in the second column alone is relevant for our purpose. For, a sizeable section of the population is left out in the first column and, of the subjects of the vassal chiefs included in the

38. Wadd, An Account of Assam, p.141.

39. Tripurā Buranī, p.2.

third column, a major section belonged to the Kachari and Jaintia Kingdoms. Thus, finally we have the following population estimates left for our consideration :

<u>Ahom State exclusive of Kamrup</u>	<u>Ahom State inclusive of Kamrup</u>
about 1615-1620 1669	c. 1711
1.68 2.44 1.60	2.88 millions

Having adjusted these figures to put them on a comparable basis in point of territorial coverage for all these years and also for 1826 and 1872, it is suggested that the actual population of the Ahom territories up to the Manas ranged from two to three millions over the one-and-a-half century ending 1750.

For a similar demographic exercise for the rest of the region, the available data are not adequate. However according to Akbar Namah, the Kingdom of Koch-Bihar, lying east of the river Sankosh, had two hundred thousand foot, four thousand horse, one thousand ships and seven hundred elephants.⁴⁰ Applying the same methods as above, it is suggested that the relevant population was somewhere between 1.64 and 3.28 millions around 1600 A.D. For the part of Koch-Hajo lying between the Sankosh and the Manas, i.e., the area that was under the Mughals until the end of our period, we have no estimate to offer.

Quite an insignificant portion of the region's population, much less than that of north India, lived in concentrated settlements that could be called towns. Such towns were not many, nor were these necessarily or predominantly non-agricultural in character. Garhgaon, the Ahom capital till about 1700 A.D., was the aggregation of a number of villages, tilled fields and a walled palace complex — all together enclosed within a three-mile wide, circular ring of live bamboo plantations. It had no market place other

40. Gait, op. cit., p. 64.

than one which had betel-leaf sellers as its only shopkeepers. The houses were built in a scattered fashion, and every man's orchard and plough land were situated, as Shihabuddin tells us, in front of his house.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Garhgaon was also the abode of a large number of artisans attached to the royal household and Karkhānās; and high-quality clasp-knives were manufactured here for a wide market. The new capital of Rangpur - a brick city close to Garhgaon - was found to be twenty miles in extent and thickly populated in 1794 by Welsh. Yet its population, perhaps, never exceeded ten thousand.⁴²

Other important towns were all in the western parts of the region. Dhubri, Ghila, Gauhati and Hajo - each of them with a fort - were referred to as quasbas by the Mughals. Originally a betel-nut market and later since the 17th century⁷ a centre of provincial administration, Gauhati was found to be an extensive and populous town, situated on both banks of the Brahmaputra, by Welsh in 1792-94. Hajo was "the most important town and the capital of the Kingdom of Cocho" in 1626, as it is known from the letter of a Jesuit father visiting it that year.⁴³

In the populous capital of Koch-Bihar (Coochbehar), there were in the same year many bazzars which were visited by merchants from Patna, Rajmahal and Gaur. In the 1660^s Shihabuddin was impressed to see its streets lined on both sides with flower-beds and trees.⁴⁴ Ranganati as a town came into prominence by 1606, when it had two churches and inter alia a small Portuguese population; and by the end of the century it became the headquarter of a Mughal Fauzdar. The town was two miles in breadth and five miles in length and, about 1770, had nearly 1500 houses.⁴⁵ A considerable quantity of Garo Hills cotton used to enter the Bengal market via Ranganati.

42. Ibid, pp.216-17; estimate by Gunabhiram Baruas Assam-bandhu, Vol.1, 1885, p.116.

43. Gait, pp.216-17; Wessels, pp.123-24 for the quote.

44. Ibid, pp.123-24 and 316-17; Gait, p.127n.

45. Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations, pp.51-52.

All these towns, as mentioned above, however owed their importance primarily to the political factor. Only Barpeta -- a cluster of artisan villages huddling together in and around the campus of a Vaishnava monastery -- owed its importance primarily to crafts and peddling trade. In 1872 and 1881 it was found to be more populous (13,758 souls in 1881) than Gauhati or any other town of the Brahmaputra valley. In our period, a few artisan villages like Sarthebari, Sualkuchi and Ramdia -- all in Kamrup -- developed, respectively, as centres of bell-metal, silk-weaving and oil-cursing industries and became trade-centres.

The distribution of population over the region had discontinuities and a degree of unevenness. In 1662-63 Shihabuddin observed that the habitations, north of the Brahmaputra, had greater abundance of cultivation than those south of it. Yet when marching along the south bank from Kaliabar to Garhgaon -- a distance of one hundred miles or so -- he found "houses and orchards full of fruit trees stretch in an unbroken line"; and "roads, houses and farms in the same style", also from Lakhugarh to Garhgaon. He observed that from the wide embanked road -- lined on both sides with bamboo groves upto the foot of the hills -- there were cultivated fields and gardens.⁴⁶ Koch-Hajo, too, was "very populous and rich" as a Jesuit father observed in 1626. These qualitative statements suggest that the northeast region in 17th-18th centuries was not as desolate and depopulated as it was found to be in the early 19th century. However the urban content of the population was extremely low, not even an estimated two percent of the population being covered by the so-called towns of the region.

IV. Social Stratification and Levels of Living

Largely based on a natural economy and lacking in urbanization, the medieval society of northeast India had basically three broad classes

of people — (i) a privileged aristocracy not obliged to render any kind of manual service to the state or its nominees; (ii) the peasantry - fishermen and artisans included — who were required to render such service or to pay a tax in lieu of it in kind or cash; and (iii) the servile class constituted of slaves (bandi-beti/golām/dās), serfs (bahatiyā) and bondsmen (bandhā/bandhuā)* of several types none of whom, excepting perhaps some of the last-mentioned, owed any kind of service to the state. They all served their respective masters alone.

Artisans and fishermen were, by and large, at the same time also peasants having cultivation as their major or subsidiary occupation. The same was true of many traders as well; but not all. Some of them emerged from the lower echelons of the aristocracy. Traders and artisans had not yet crystallized into a separate and viable social group. It was only in the latter phase of our period, as reflected in the kathā-guru-charita, that, under the impact of limited market opportunities, the traders and artisans tended to become distinct identities. No more in the caste sense, but in the real occupational sense.

The above classification will remain inadequate unless the role taken by each class in production is also stated. The secular aristocracy was constituted of the rajahs, vassal chieftains and chief nobles. They had hereditary estates on which the slaves, bondsmen and tenants (bilatiyā-pāiks) carried on the cultivation. Besides, they had a monopoly of all important offices of the state. While in office, they were given portions of crown lands as their perquisites and, to get these lands cultivated, also a number of pāik servitors, denominated as likchaus, from the state militia.

* Men who have mortgaged their labour; debt-slaves.

Alongside of the lords temporal, there were lords spiritual as well. The spiritual aristocracy consisted of all big holders of revenue-free land grants made in favour of three categories of grantees — (i) temple-gods (in the case of devottar grants), (ii) religious institutions like the satras (in case of darnottar and pirpal grants) and (iii) learned Brahmins (in the case of brahmottar grants). Throughout our period big tracts of land, with or without serfs attached to them, continued to be donated by the rulers. As in the case of the secular aristocracy, these landholdings were worked by slaves, serfs and other bondsmen as well as by dependent peasant paiks — the latter permanently transferred, together with their rights and obligations, from the register of the state militia to the jurisdiction of the respective grantees. Such paiks constituted a body of tenantry. A member of the aristocracy, temporal or spiritual, was always formally addressed as deuta or prabhu, which terms could be literally translated as 'lord'.

The essence of the paik system could be best comprehended with a reference to the details of its working under the Ahoms in Assam. In the lower echelons of the aristocracy and at its margin were the chanua paiks who were not required to render manual service of any kind to the state, because of their good birth or relative affluence. In fact many of them occupied a middle position in the socio-economic hierarchy, having no big stake in rank, power or estate-holding. They had access to the petty offices in the militia and the bureaucratic establishment, and they managed to carry on cultivation with one, two or more of slaves and bondsmen. In the 16th century, the household of Shankardeva (1449-1568), a Vaishnava reformer, was said to have had a number of slaves and bondsmen.⁴⁷ Dispossessed bhuyans, men of so-called good castes including traders, artisans and scribes and the village headmen were largely found in chanua ranks. Peasant paiks, when exempted from manual service on grounds of their holding petty offices in the militia or on grounds of their caste origins, were

47. Kathā-guru-charita, p.619.

promoted into this chanuā status-group. Those few chanuās who were freed from even the obligation of non-manual service were known as a-paikan (non-paik) chanuā.

The peasantry constituted the largest class with a degree of stratification within it. In functional and status terms, they were denominated as Kāri (archer) pāiks. Subject to rendering service to the state or permitted to pay compensation in lieu of it, they carried on cultivation in their own holdings. Alongside of cultivation, they also carried on fishing and other collecting activities as well as craft activities like weaving, spinning, basket-making, etc., within their own households. Timber, bamboo, reeds, thatching grass and canes were largely free forest products. These were used in the construction of houses and the making of tools, weapons, traps, ploughs, stamping blocks and pounding poles, ropes and canoes. They mutually helped each other in harvesting, house-building and other activities which needed more labour at a point of time than a household could provide on its own.

Peasant inequality stemmed from one or more of the following factors — (i) windfall bumper crops or a sudden loss of crops or draught animals; (ii) the degree of participation in profitable craft and trading activities or in the production of cash crops; (iii) the extent of availability of family labour, depending on the household size and its composition; and (iv) an access to perquisites of petty offices in the militia. Such inequality was often measured by the number of plough units or granaries a household owned. Most of the peasant households owned one plough and had one granary; but some had two, and the rich had three or more.

Once affluent, the peasant could purchase — as the lords did — a slave or two; but this rarely happened. More often he got the labour of a poor peasant mortgaged to him against a small loan. That the practice was well-established at least since the 16th century is corroborated by facts on

record. One of Shankaradeva's disciples was formerly a bonded labour for consideration of a loan of one rupee worth of cowries. It is stated in the Katha-guru-charita that Bhabananda, the merchant, took pity on a bonded ploughman and got him released from bondage by paying off his outstanding debt of rupees five. Momai Tamuli, who rose to the rank of a minister and nobleman in the 17th century was also believed to have been a bonded labourer against a loan of rupees four, in his early life.⁴⁸ Many such instances could be given. The labour mortgage system provided opportunities to the affluent peasants to exploit poor peasants for private gains. Incidentally, mortgage of land was not yet in vogue in our period.

The peasant generally enjoyed his land rights undisturbed. As long as he continued to fulfil his obligation to the state, he had the right also to cultivate his portion of the wet rice lands or an equivalent portion given in lieu of it. His freedom of movement was not restricted except when on militia duty. In the case of homestead and garden lands, his rights could not be easily taken away by the state. We have the instance of an Ahom householder successfully resisting royal encroachment on his land in the 16th century. In another case in the 17th century, King Pratap Singha had to conciliate the villagers with a feast and gifts to get additional lands for his ancestral farm.⁴⁹ In due course, however, peasants' traditional rights were increasingly threatened by state claims. It was in the 17th century that the ^{emergent} feudal relations ^{became} emerged as a centralizing force both in the economy as well as in the polity. But at their base, the militia continued to retain much of its tribal legacy. The result was a contradiction that precipitated a crisis after 1750, not to be resolved even by a lingering civil war. In the capacity of paiks,

48. Ibid, p. 101; Bhuyan, Lachit Barphukan and His Times, p. 17; Neog, Sankaradeva and His Times, p. 77.

49. Satsari Asam Buranji, p. 3; Guha, Indian Historical Review, Vol. 1, p. 69.

the peasants had their worst time when they had to work as allotted likchaus in office-holders' estates and households, with full exposure to their cruelties and extortions. It is estimated that one-fourth to one-third of the mobilized pāiks were allotted as likchaus.⁵⁰ Available as they were for a limited period, exploitation was more ruthless in their case than in the case of slaves. For, the latter were valuable personal property and had to be preserved. Moreover, all pāiks including likchaus had to face war hazards when their turns came; but the slaves did not have to.

Under the circumstances, the militia obligations were becoming increasingly unpopular towards the end of our period. One form of protest was to evade registration as a pāik on attaining maturity or playing truant by bribing the petty officers. Yet another form of protest was to take refuge in a Vaishnava monastery as a monk and claim exemption on that ground. The Vaishnava movement therefore had to face oppression by the state from time to time in the 17th - 18th centuries. There were even satras that functioned underground with support at the grassroots. In the early 1690^s, thousands of monks were dragged from their monasteries and were forced to build roads as pāiks.⁵¹ It appears therefore that there was a correlation between the spread of Vaishnavism and the peasant protests against imposed feudal control and bureaucratization of the militia system from above.

Slavery that prevailed in the region was both domestic and agrestic. Prisoners of war, persons purchased from the hill tribes, condemned criminals and persons born of slaves constituted a major section of the servile class. Slaves could be bought and sold. Though there was no organized market for such transactions, slaves were often an export item in the trade with Bengal, Bhutan and Upper Burma, and they featured prominently in the marriage dowry of rich men's daughters. There were also

50. Ibid, p.71.

51. Document cited in Prāchyashāsanāvali, pp. I-81-82; Gait, pp.168-9.

instances of peasants voluntarily selling themselves or their wives and daughters.⁵² No strict distinction appears to have been maintained between serfdom and slavery; in the absence of the classical form of a dehumanized slavery. Serfs and bondsmen often lapsed into conditions of slavery in course of time; and slaves, too, when attached to land were treated increasingly as serfs, with some socially recognized rights silently-acquired meanwhile. It is estimated that slaves, serfs and bondsmen⁵³ constituted 5 to 9 per cent of the population.

7 togo-
ther

Standard of living varied both regionwise and class-wise. East of the Barnadi, silk was used more than cotton clothes almost by everybody whereas most people used cotton clothes more in the western parts of the region. Men's clothes as revealed in sculptures of the early part of our period consisted of a single unstitched cloth piece (dhoti) wrapped round the waist and hardly reaching the knee. The same continued to be the common wear. Women did not use any kind of veil and freely moved amongst men. About the common dress in eastern Assam Shihabuddin observed:⁵⁴

"It is not their custom to tie turbans round the head, to wear coats, trousers or shoes, or to sleep on bodstods. They only wrap a piece of fine linen round the head, and a waistband around the middle, and place a chaddar on the shoulders. Some of their rich men in winter put on a half-coat like a jacket."

In the biographies of the Vaishnava reformers, one comes across frequent references to three pieces of men's clothes — (i) bhuni (dhoti) of silk or cotton covering up to the knees, (ii) pachara (wrapper) and (iii) dopati

52. Documents cited in Prāchyaśāsanāvalī, pp. I-72, 102 and I.80.

53. Guha, Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. 3, pp. 233-34.

54. Gait, p. 147.

or tana (double-folded scurf).⁵⁵ Chaugā (waist-coat), Chāpkān (long shirt), Jamā (Jacket), turbans etc. as parts of ceremonial costumes made their appearance in the royal court, from the close of the 17th century and, later, also in the satras.

Rich or poor, people lived in thatched houses, the greater or lesser use of timber and space making all the difference. Common people's needs were simple, and these could be by and large met from their own production and collection activities. Rice and fish — rivers and marshes abounded in fish — constituted regular items of diet for both the rich and the poor. So was a variety of vegetables, roots and tubers — both grown and collected. A majority of the people also consumed an alcoholic drink prepared from rice, though the habit was looked down in caste society. It appears from literary sources that the per capita intake of rice, fish, meat and leafy vegetables was higher in the later phase of our period than in the British period. The per capita intake of salt, oil and cotton cloth, on the other hand, was obviously much less. Salt being expensive, poor people used more of alkali (khar) as its substitute. Ghee was also not a common item of food. The scarcity of salt and non-use of ghee as well as the excessive chewing of pan (betel-leaf with betel-nut) were particularly noted by Shihabuddin.

The ecological balance between man and nature, maintained throughout our period, had, on the whole, a determining influence on the consumption pattern and its continuity. Northeast India was particularly free from any devastating famines, though frequent floods and less frequent, jolting earthquakes put the people in distress from time to time. In the years 1569, 1570, 1641, 1642 and 1665, there were partial crop failures due to locusts, droughts or floods. But famines with such virility as one finds elsewhere in India never threatened the lives of the people of northeast India during the period under review.

55. Katha-guru-charita, p.316; Sarma, The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam, p.145.

In the matter of using furniture and utensils, there was a different life style for the aristocracy, but not much difference between different strata of the peasantry. Alongside of earthen pots, a few vessels made of brass, bell-metal and copper appear to have constituted the prized possessions of many households. For sleeping, people used bamboo mats. Those who could afford it slept on a plank of a few inches' height (ohālpirā), which served for a bedstead.

The aristocratic style of living was one of pomp and splendour and was marked by a wasteful use of too many servants. Noblemen and heads of satras used sedan-chairs (dolā), elephants and pleasure-boats of special make as status symbols while moving from one place to another. Lesser richmen too emulated them within the limits permitted by the status-conscious aristocracy. As to the food in high society, we can make a fair idea from the provisions which were supplied to high-ranking guests of the state (see Appendix-2) on several occasions in the 17th-18th centuries, taking into consideration their preferences and prejudices.

An affluent household owning several plough units was also generally big-sized, with dependants included. In Kathā-guru-charita, we come across a pundit who had a joint family household of 260 members and nine granaries, and a state official who had four to six granaries. Another official, working for a paik unit, had on his 32-acre homestead plot a 150-member household establishment including servile and free dependants. He had also a flock of 200 goats and two herds of cattle kept by four cowherds. No more details are available about their life style.⁵⁶

Since money loans had emerged as a major instrument of creating and stabilizing economic inequalities, a pertinent question arises as to the rate of interest charged. From the single instance provided by Kathā-guru-charita, the rate appears to have been in one case 22 per cent

compound or 45 per cent simple per year for a credit of Rs.120/-, extended by a trader to a householder in the form of goods and remaining unpaid for seven years.⁵⁷ Insolvent borrowers who had their labour mortgaged to the creditors had to remain tied to the latter for years for settling the principal sum and the growing interest. Meanwhile further borrowing more often than not made his release from bondage a remote possibility. Bonded labour was not treated well. One who was freed by Bhabananda, the merchant, was reported to have complained — "They beat me; refuse to give food and wear. What to tell about my miseries?" Slaves and bondsmen were often fed from the common household kitchen.⁵⁸ For the poorest stratum of people, the social treatment that was meted out in the medieval times remains more or less the same even today.

V. Contradictions, Crisis and Collapse

Whatever changes were perceptible as a long-term trend over the centuries under review in northeast India's medieval polity, society and economy were obviously slow by modern standards. Even at the threshold of the 1750^s, the Assamese traders were, by and large, still at the stage of peddling. Most artisan crafts — even weaving and oil-crushing — continued to be largely combined with agriculture in peasant households. The state continued to collect the bulk of its tax proceeds largely in the form of labour-rent (except in Kamrup) and only partly in kind or money. Thus ~~extracted~~ the surplus was only re-distributed within the ruling class. The extent of taxation in money, though marginal, was on the increase alongside increasing coinage since the 16th century. Yet its impact was so inadequate that Captain Welsh found no grain market to resort to as late as in 1792-94 when the British East India Company's interventionist

57. Ibid., p.553.

58. Ibid, p.101 and p.297.

troops were quartered in the Ahom Kingdom.⁵⁹ As noted above, Mir Jumla's troops also had to face the same problem in the 1660^s.

Yet within these limitations, a small and growing market sector was indeed in operation. Exchange operations were conducted on both barter and cowrie currency terms. Land sales, though uncommon, did take place, sporadically, in some thickly-populated areas. Private property rights over certain categories of land, draught animals and grain stocks did create a degree of differentiation by 1750 within the peasant society. Indebtedness was an increasing phenomenon in this society.

The quantum of surplus products of the region marketed, largely in exchange of imports like salt, saltpetre, sulphur, copper and other metals, muslim and a few sundry articles, however remained too small to stimulate any kind of sophistication within the region's craft and trade organization. Muga (a semi-wild silk variety) was an item that entered into long-distance international trade. But its production base hardly underwent any perceptible structural change. The same was, more or less, true in the case of other traded goods like lac and other dyes, much in use through raw materials in Bengal's textile industries. Even the increase in output, if any, in response to demand from outside remained modest.

Let us take Duplex's private experience of trading with the Ahom Kingdom. In collaboration with two other merchants, respectively, of the English and the Dutch East India Companies and with high hopes, Duplex sent to Garhgaon a private trade mission in 1739. At least ten boat-loads of broad cloth, vermillion, corals and other sundry goods for sale, together with presents to King Shiva Sinha, were sent with the mission. The immediate objects of the mission were to procure white silk (pāt), pepper, musk, elephant tusks etc in exchange and to explore trade opportunities on a regular basis for the future.

59. Report of Welsh cited by Gait, p.217.

A relatively developed market was there for such cash crops as betel-nuts, betel-leaves, mustard-seeds, lac, and silk.

The mission apparently ended in failure and had to return to Dacca with much of the Assam-bound cargo remaining unsold. Failing to procure desired quantities of white silk, musk, pepper and elephant tusks at prices he thought reasonable, Duploix concluded that the prospects of trading with the Ahom Kingdom were bleak. "So all that has been reported to us about the country" -- wrote he in utter disgust in course of a private letter -- "must be false".⁶⁰

Such were the conditions that persisted within the Ahom Kingdom. Conditions elsewhere in northeast India (as demarcated for this study) were also no better, since tribal and semi-tribal structures within the region's feudal mode of production yet remained to be dissolved. Their extremely low level of commodity production failed to release forces adequate to act as effective dissolvants of such structures.

Meanwhile the feudal mode -- even before it had attained maturity -- headed towards a crisis in the middle decades of the 18th century. For, contradictions within it developed and sharpened. The main contradiction was, of course, between the entire peasantry (including part-time traders and artisans and the tribal shifting cultivators at the peripheries) and the ruling nobility, both temporal and spiritual. The peasantry, rich and poor alike, looked forward to freedom from the oppressive compulsions of the paik militia system at a time when the ruling class was screwing up the tax machine. The upper stratum of the peasantry, constituted of affluent peasants including peasant artisans and traders, would in an attempt to get rid of the hated kanri paik service, even put forward a claim to and accept commutation of their service obligations into the form of a money tax. But even this was not

60. Duploix to Mathee, 8 March 1740 : Duploix's correspondence in French, 1739-1740, B.N. Fr. 8982 f 66 V.; Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, as consulted and translated by my colleague at the Centre, Dr. Indrami Ray, for purposes of her own research.

I am grateful to her for introducing me to this hitherto unused source and for permitting me to cite the relevant materials even before she had used them for her forthcoming publication.

conceded to by the Ahom State as a general policy.

As a result, both the upper and poorer strata of the peasantry increasingly played truant when called up to service as kanri paiks and, finally, they rose in 1770 in a big way in open revolts against the state and the private feudal estates. The contradiction between the hierarchy of high feudal officers and the by-and-large democratic and popular base of the largely tribal and semi-tribal peasant militia was but a reflection of the main contradiction between the two major classes. Amongst others, the contradiction between different sections of the ruling class was also important. Prolonged and frequent absence of the militia men from their production activities in the 18th century surely tended to affect production and hence also the process of surplus extraction. To that extent, the maintenance of an ever-expanding ruling class was becoming increasingly difficult. There was also a vigorous emergence of tribal revivalism amongst sections of population in the wake of the increasing exploitation.

All these caused the feudal crisis to deepen and burst into a series of peasant revolts converging on a religious civil war that devastated the Ahom Kingdom from end to end, during the years 1770-1809.⁶¹ This devastation took place at a time when the company-ruled parts of northeast India were also undergoing ruination under the great Bengal famine and its aftermath.

It was under these circumstances that the Burmese occupation forces ~~during~~ 1817-1825, and the British occupation forces who replaced them immediately thereafter, stepped in. Whatever local crafts and seeds

61. A more detailed disscussion by the present author of the feudal crisis, that deepened after 1750, and the civil war will soon follow in the Centre's mimeographed Occasional Papers Series under the title 'Neo-Vaishnavism to Insurgency : A Study of the Moamaria Peasant Uprisings in 18th-century Assam.'

of indigenous trading activities survived the Civil War (e.g. peasant traders dealing in mustard-seeds and sending their boats as far as Bengal) were suddenly exposed during the 19th century to the large-scale trading operations of the Calcutta-based British managing agency houses and Marwari trading capital in their service. What followed was the onslaught of a deindustrialization process and a structurally stultified start in modernization. The concomitant forced transition to a plantation economy in the region introduced only new complexities and dimensions of under-development rather than removing what was 'primitive' and 'backward' in its medieval socio-economic milieu.

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Appendix-I

A Note on Kathā-guru-charita

Written in Assamese prose, the text of this source was edited by Upendrachandra Lekharu and was published, with an introduction in English, from Nalbari in 1952. The original manuscript, containing one hundred and fifty folios of sanchi (acquilaria agallocha) bark, was earlier obtained from the Barpeta Satra by Banikanta Kakati.

After the death of Sankaradeva (1449-1568 A.D.), the founder of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam, a tradition developed in due course amongst the Vaishnava monks to narrate in congregations accepted versions of various episodes in his life as well as the lives of other important Vaishnava saints to follow. This accumulated biographical lore, preserved almost in original form and orally transmitted from generation to generation, constituted the basis of a number of attempts at reducing it to writing — first in verse and then also in prose. Katha-guru-charita was one such late attempt at recording oral history relating to the lives of the Assamese Vaishnava saints and their geneologies and covering the entire period from the 13th to the early 18th century.

Although the compilation remains anonymous and undated, internal evidences establish conclusively that it was recorded within a few years of, and not earlier than, 1716 A.D. It is also almost certain that this 18th-century work pre-dates the lingering civil war that broke out in 1770 and ruined Assam. For otherwise, the disturbances of the civil war period would have had left their imprint, at least casually, in a sensitive work like this.

A compilation of this nature cannot be expected to be totally free of deliberate or unconscious tampering by scribes. However, as Assam had a strong tradition of local historiography, such tampering of facts - if any at all - was not likely to take place on a noticeable scale. On the contrary, an acute sense of chronology as well as a concern for both facts and corroboration permeates the work throughout. The availability of a number of charita-puthis (biographical works) by other authors more or less in the same tradition also helps us cross-check the facts.

A more serious problem is posed by the appearance of certain details (e.g. reference to particular types of coins in circulation) which, though relevant to the author's times, might not be so in their specified context. Obviously, in reconstructing the past, the compiler did, to a marginal extent, unconsciously project the social milieu of his own times into the 16th - 17th centuries (but not the earlier). However this hardly affects the value of the source for our purposes. First, because the pace of social change during the medieval times was extremely slow by any standard; and, secondly, because we are no less interested in the early 18th century when the limited medieval growth in population, trade and monetization was at its height in northeast India.

Though of immense importance to research in social and economic history of northeast India, Katha-guru-charita has not yet received adequate scholarly attention it deserves. A more careful and scientific re-editing of the work on the basis of rigorous textual criticism and annotation is long over-due.

Appendix - 2

FOOD PROVISIONS SUPPLIED TO DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS BY THE
HOST GOVERNMENTS : 1640-1723 A.D.

To the Ahom Government's Envoys by the Mughals		To the Mughal Government's Envoys by the Ahoms
At Shah Buruj near Gauhati	at Delhi	In Assam
C. 1640 A. D.	C. 1663 A.D.	C. 1650 A.D.
/	1	2 /

	Rice (quality not mentioned)	Rice (both fine and course)	Rice (both fine and course)
1. Grain			
2. Pulses	Mung (phaseolus mungo); <u>Masur</u> (lentil); <u>Mah</u> (phaseolus radiatus).	Mung; <u>Khesari</u> / <u>Ka Janah</u> (lathyrus sativus); <u>Masur</u> ; <u>Mah</u> .	Mung; <u>Matinah</u> (phaseolus acnitifolius)
3. Meat	Goat (castrated); Tortoise.	Deer.	Goat (castrated); Deer; Chicken
4. Fish & Eggs	Fish	—	Fish Duck's eggs
5. Milk Products	Ghee	Milk Ghee	Ghee
6. Cooking Oil	Mustard Oil	—	Mustard Oil
7. Condiments	Pepper; Ginger	Pepper; Turmeric (powdered); Ginger; Asafoetida; Tejpat (bay-leaf)	Pepper
8. Vegetables, Fruits & Pickles	—	—	Oranges
9. Sugar / Gur	Granulated Sugar; <u>Gur</u> (liquid).	Granulated Sugar	Granulated Sugar; Gur (liquid).
10. Salt	Common Salt	Common Salt	Common Salt
11. <u>Pan</u>	Dried Areca-nuts & Betel-leaves.	Dried Areca-nuts & Betel-leaves.	Raw Areca-nuts & Betel-leaves.

Note : Quantities in the sources are given in weights in some cases, but mostly in terms of baskets, pitchers, pots, bundles, bunches, pieces and number. Obviously, when food provisions were supplied to envoys at their camps, their preferences and prejudices as well as the question of local availability were also taken into consideration. Envoys of the Ahom and Jaintia Kings were Brahmin by caste and the Mughal envoys were Muslims. In the case of the Jaintia King's envoy, the Ahom officials were instructed to receive him with a show of coldness.

In the 1660s Shihabuddin observed that it was not the custom of the people of eastern Assam to take Ghee.

Sources : Kamrupar Buranjī, pp. 46 and 86;

Jayantiā Buranjī, pp. 92-102 and 123;

Asam Buranjī, p. 77.

Purani Asam Buranjī, p.137.

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