EARLY INHABITANTS OF ASSAM

The history of Assam can be divided into three periods— the ancient, medieval and modern. The medieval period starts with the advent of the Ahoms. And the modern period began roughly from the time of consolidation of British paramountcy over Assam in the nineteenth century. In order to understand the life and conditions of the people of medieval and modern period, it is necessary to give a brief reference to the inhabitants of ancient Assam.

Assam, the easternmost state of India was earlier known as Pragjyotisa. In the medieval times it was known as Kamrup. The modern name of the state is Assam. It was after the arrival of the Ahoms that Kamrup came to be known as 'Asam' which means unequal.

Population of Assam is heterogeneous consisting of peoples of different races and tribes. People from North, West and East have come to Assam and settled. People belonging to different ethnic groups like the Austro-Dravidian, the Aryans and the Tibeto Burmans, entered Assam at different intervals, from times immemorial. For several centuries, valleys
and hill areas of north-eastern India were exposed to large scale invasion. Due to this invasion, the province of Assam turned into a museum of nationalities.¹

The Austrians from Indo China, the Dravidians, the Indo-Aryans and the Siamese-Chinese section of the Mongoloids, the Thai tribes of the Ahoms and such other diverse elements became Indianised specially in the Brahmaputra Valley.² The mutual interaction among these diverse elements contributed much in building up Assamese culture and society.

The cultural synthesis of various tribal groups like the Bodos, the Rabas, the Tiwas, the Mishings, Karbis, Dimasas, Chutiya, Moran, Miri, Naga (some of these groups belonged to the different branches of Mongoloids, ¦nd) led to the development of Assamese culture.

Assamese nationality is a heterogeneous community comprising these tribal groups. Different ethnic groups came, settled and mixed with the local tribal people at different times and merged into a community known

as 'Assamese', for about 450 years, the Bodos and the Ahoms contended for supremacy and ultimately this led to a gradual merger of both the races into a single Assamese speaking people. "The late medieval period of Assam saw the formation of an Assamese speaking nation with independent existence in the Brahmaputra Valley with its own regional individualities. During the period the autochthonous Bodo race together with the Aryan elements and the Ahoms were finally welded with the Aryan Hindu settlers of the valley into a single people - the Assamya or the Assamese people".

In the medieval period, Assam was known as Kamrup.

The kingdom of Kamrup was established by Pusyavarman in the fourth century. It gained strength during the reign of Bhaskaravarman in the seventh century. Chinese pilgrim, Hsuan Teang, paid a visit to India during his reign. The varman dynasty came to an end with the death of Bhaskaravarman who lived until at least 850 A.D. Since his successors were not competent enough, this led to the downfall of the varman dynasty. It was replaced by Pala dynasty in the later part of tenth century with


Brahmapal as its king. Around the beginning of the twelfth century, the Pala dynasty also came to an end. The first Muslim invasion of Assam took place at the end of that century. After the departure of the Muslims, some petty independent chiefs ruled the land. This type of administration continued for a few years until the Koches came to power.

Prior to the advent of the Ahoms, the state of Assam was ruled by various dynasties which included Koches, Chutiyas, Kachurias, Kamata etc. The territory now known as the province of Assam was not always ruled by kings of the same dynasty. Different kingdoms such as Pragjyotishpur, Kamata, Sonitpur, Chutiya kingdom, Kachari kingdom etc., comprising different geographical areas, flourished at different times. However, a stable government could not be formed at that time due to constant struggle among the princes.

THE AHOM RULE

Prior to the advent of the British, the Brahmaputra Valley was ruled by the Ahoms. Around the end of twelfth century, the Ahom power was rising in northern Assam. In the early part of thirteenth century
along with Ahoms, the chutiyas and kacharis and numerous petty chiefs who were known as Bhuyans ruled some parts of Assam. The Ahom rule in Assam dates back to thirteenth century.

The Ahoms, a Mao-Shan branch of the Tai race of upper Burma, ruled over the Brahmaputra Valley for about 600 years, came to Assam in the early part of thirteenth century under the leadership of Sukapha and founded the Ahom kingdom. The small states, which emerged after the decline of Kamrup, were brought by them under a single government. They succeeded to some extent in bringing back the political unity of Brahmaputra Valley.

The Ahoms brought with them their own culture, religion and civilization. The 'Sino Tibetan Thai Speech' (a new speech) was brought to India by the Ahoms. They first introduced the system of keeping records of events. They had a deep sense of history. "The Ahoms had the historic sense very fully developed, and many of the priests and nobles maintained Buranjis or Chronicles, which were written up from time to time and which contain a careful, reliable and continuous narrative
of their rule. They accepted Assam as their own land. They adopted Hinduism as their religion and accepted local Assamese language as their language. "The Ahoms were Buddhists but married local girls and adopted local language and religion." However, they did not totally discard their own religion and customs even after accepting Hinduism. "Even after their acceptance of Hinduism, the Ahoms did not completely give up their religion and their customs. On ascending the throne every king assumed two names, one in Assamese Hindu form and the other in Ahom." But, gradually, by seventeenth century, they gave up their own language and religion. They absorbed what was best amongst the conquered race and, in course of time, they became a part and parcel of the Assamese people.

Sukapha, the founding father of the Ahom kingdom and his descendants ruled over Assam from 1228 to 1826 A.D. Despite many powerful challenges, the Ahoms retained their control over Assam till the advent of the

5. Jindal, p.70.
British. From thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, they engaged themselves in conquering the neighbouring tribes such as Morans and Borogis. The Ahoms brought them under their domination along with some sections of Nagas and Kacharis.

From sixteenth century onwards, the Ahoms started expanding their empire with the annexation of the kingdom of the Chutiyas by the Ahom king Suhungmung or Dihingia Raja. They brought under their control the Bhuyan chieftains also who at that time were ruling the North bank of the Brahmaputra. The Ahoms brought under their sway rivals like Chutiya and hill people, including the Nagas and the Mikirs, and gradually they conquered the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley. In 1708 A.D., the Kachari and the Jaintia Kingdoms were annexed by the Ahom Kingdom.

DOWNFALL OF AHOM KINGDOM

From the middle of eighteenth century, the Ahom Kingdom began to crumble due to many inefficient rulers.
The Ahoms did not have capable and competent monarchs after Rudra Singh. From the middle of eighteenth century, contradictions started developing between the ruling nobility and the peasantry because the later was harassed by the nobility through imposition of heavy tax on them. This increasing exploitation compelled the peasantry to revolt against the nobility. Revolts by the peasants destroyed the Ahom Kingdom during the years 1770-1809. Again, contradictions developed among the ruling class itself.

In the middle of eighteenth century, the Moamoriahs (a religious sect) gained strength and revolted twice against the Ahoms. Gradually, rebellion broke out all over Assam. Finally, the British sent troops under Capt. T. Welsh for controlling the rebellion. The Moamoriahs were defeated in 1792. Capt. Welsh felt that people may again revolt because of the over oppressive nature of the King. He realised the need for keeping a brigade of British troops in Assam and it was done according to the consent of the then prevailing nobility group. Lord Cornwallis was the Governor General at that time. But the Governor who succeeded Lord Cornwallis ordered the British troop to return to Calcutta in 1794.
The withdrawal of British troops led to confusion and disorder. In the midst of general disorder and a chaotic situation, an Ahom noble, Badan Chandra Barphukan, sought help from the Burmese. This led to the destruction of Ahom Kingdom. After his death in 1819 A.D., Ahom Kingdom was invaded and occupied by the Burmese. A reign of terror prevailed during the Burmese rule and some Assamese even left the country and took shelter in Goalpara and Rangpur which were under British territory at that time. "The oppressions of the Burmese became more and more unbearable ... not only did they rob everyone who had anything worth taking, but they went only burnt down villages, and even temples ... many fled to the hills and to Jaintia, Manipur and other countries". In the wake of Burmese and British invasions, Ahom rule in the country came to an end. The Britishers ousted the Burmese and brought the valley under their dominion in 1826.

The advent of Muslims in Assam also brought a fundamental change in the social system. Social stratification could be found in the medieval period with the nobility at the top, traders at the middle and...
peasantry at the bottom of social hierarchy. The Assamese society underwent transformation in the middle of seventeenth century during the Ahom-Mughal conflict. The Mughals brought a change in the socio-cultural sphere of Assamese society. When the Mughals invaded Assam, the Ahoms adopted many aspects of the culture of the Mughals. Many cultural elements of the Mughals percolated into the Assamese way of life.

The Ahoms tried to restructure their socio-political system on the line of the Mughal system. The system of arranging paiks into different Khels with some officers, had some similarities with Mansabāri system of the Mughals. The history of the Ahoms of the seventeenth century was mainly the history of Ahom-Mughal conflict. The Mughals invaded Assam to extend their territories further to the east.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION DURING THE AHOM PERIOD

Traditional Ahom society was stratified into numerous categories. There were seven clans (Phoids) of the Ahoms. The first three were (1) Raja (of royal
lineage), (ii) Buragohain (minister senior) and Borgohain (minister junior). There is difference of opinion about the last four clans of the Ahoms.

Three categories of people could generally be found in the pre-British Assamese society. The Varna system shaped and moulded the social system of the then Assamese society. Accordingly, higher castes constituted the upper class of the society. "Prior to the coming of the British this area was archaic in character and feudal in structure. There were three main strain in Assamese society viz., priests or Brahmins, Gosains (including some Kayasthas and Kalitas), Dangoria (nobility and high ranking officials) and Baiks or lagus (commoners and slaves)".10

During Ahom rule, Kingship was hereditary. In the administrative echelon, the king was the supreme head. "The king had to be selected from one of the following royal lineages—Dahingiya, Charingiya, Tungkhungiya, Namrupiya, Samaguriya, Tipamiya and Parvatiya".11 King had a council of three ministers who were known as

gohains. The office of each of the Gohains were the monopoly of particular family or clan. These posts were to be filled up only with the men of their own respective dynasties. The representation of different Ahom clans or phods was an important factor in the grant of appointments.  

The king had a council of three ministers—the Gohains. They performed advisory functions and the king was assisted by them. The king had to consult them on all important matters, but some kings such as Pratap Singh, Gadadhar Singh and Rudra Singh appear to have followed their own wishes ignoring the opinions of the nobles. While some other kings like Sudaipha and Kamalasen Singh, acted according to the advice of council of ministers.  

The advisors to the king in the Ahom system of administration were known under the collective name of 'Patra Mantri'. The most important offices were those of Buxagahain, Bongohain, Bapatmarghain, Bazarus and Barphukan who were popularly known as 'Bongariyay' or in other words the privileged class. The king could be enthroned or deposed by the first three. Though the

king was the head of the whole edifice, he hardly enjoyed absolute power. In case of misuse of royal prerogative, the council of ministers could even remove the monarch.

Originally there were only two high offices—Buragohain and Borgohain. In the reign of Suhungmung (Oeingis Raja) a third i.e., the Barpatra gohain was incorporated. "During the period from 1603 to 1648, the militia system was thoroughly reformed with a view to confronting the Mughal invasion. The state became more centralised in that process. Two new offices—those of the Barphukan and Barbarua were created, thus raising the number of Patra-Mantri to five".14

The Barphukan had a council of six subordinate phukans. Each phukan like Chutiya Phukan and Deka Phukan had different functions to perform. These Phukans were consulted by Barphukan in all important matters. Second highest position were occupied by the Barua. The Barbarua wielded great power being the head of judiciary. The Barbarua was the Chief Justice of the entire Ahom Kingdom. There were numerous other officials in the Ahom system of administration like Rajdhana, Katakia, Bartia, Chutiya, etc.

Kakatis and Oolois, The appointments for the posts like Barbarus and Barphukan were not hereditary and were open to persons of any lineage. Higher classes of non-Ahom citizens were also appointed in some posts which were not connected with military service. All the positions of military system were occupied by the Ahom Kings and their descendants. Generally only minor posts were offered to non-Ahom. Baruaship was offered to non-Ahom be he a Hindu or a Muslim.

During Ahom rule the adult male population in the 16-50 age group was registered as state paiks* to render services to the state. However, nobles, priests and people belonging to high castes were excluded from these. These paiks in normal times had to serve as labourer and had to serve as soldier during time of war. Families emerged along with the introduction of paik system. Paiks were organised into 'gots'.** Consisting generally of four paiks, Paiks were further arranged into 'khels'.*** Each khel had to render specific services to the state as revenue collecting, arrow making, house building etc.

* Paiks were the manual servants. They enjoyed rent-free tenure in return for their services to the state.
** Three to four paiks constituted a 'got'.
*** Khel was an administrative unit under the Ahoms headed by a Phukan or a Barua and commanded by officers viz., Rajkhawas, Hazarikas, Saikias and Boras.
The important khels were placed in charge of a Phukan, and those khels which were not of much importance were placed in charge of a Rajshouq or a Barua. Barua was an administrative head. "The military-cum-civil officers— they had control also over the administration of justice in respect of the men under them—formed a chain of command from the top downwards. A Phukan was in command of a division (khel) of 6,000, a Hazarika of a thousand, a Saikia (centurian) of a hundred and a Bora (headman) of 20 militiamen." The power on the part of the paiks to nominate or dismiss their Boras, Saikias or Hazarikas, helped them to save themselves from the oppressive elements of the state.

During Ahom rule, the aristocracy consisting of Rajas and nobles, had hereditary estates on which the slaves and bondsman carried on cultivation. In the lower echelons of aristocracy there were the Chamua Paiks, who were not required to render manual service of any kind to the state because of their good birth. Men of good castes including traders, artisans, scribes could be clubbed into this Chamua paik category. They, unlike

15. Ibid, p.6.

Bondsman refers to that group of people who mortgaged their labour.
the paiks, had a different status and rendered non-manual
service to the state in accordance with their skills and
status or had to pay taxes in lieu of such services.\textsuperscript{16}
Though the main occupation of these Chamua paiks were
trade yet sometimes cultivation was also carried on with
the help of slaves by the Chamua paiks. They had neither
the status of privileged nobles nor labouring paiks.
Apparently, it seems that this Chamua paiks* had an
in-between status in society. But they did not form a
separate class in Assamese society. These Chamua paiks
of pre-British Assamese society did not get salary in
return of their service to the state. They got land or
slaves in return for their service. They could be
considered as lower cadre of nobility and not middle
class, though they occupied a middle position in the
socio-economic hierarchy. Because they were not salaried
employees in state service. In pre-British Assamese
society, practically there was no middle class standing
between the nobility and the peasantry. Even the
literati and petty officials in the state service were not
employed on a salaried basis but were instead rewarded
with lands, slaves and serfs. They, therefore,

\* Chamuas were the respectable paiks.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p.23.
constituted the lower echelons of the nobility is, the Chamua status group within it, not a middle class.\textsuperscript{17}

The Chamuas could work in petty offices in the militia and bureaucratic establishment. Sometimes even some peasant paiks were exempted from manual service by virtue of their holding petty offices and thereby promoting them to this Chamua group. Some Chamus even did not have to render non-manual service or in other words they were freed from doing this. They were known as a Paiken Chamuas (non-Paikas). The 'Chamua Paiks' as well as the 'Kanri Paiks'\textsuperscript{**} were allotted to different khels viz., Naubicho (the clan of boatman), hilaidari (the clan of gunnari) etc. The peasantry known as 'Kanri Paiks' was the largest group during Ahom period. Services were rendered by the Kanri Paiks as ordinary soldiers and labourers. Though cultivation was their main occupation they were also engaged in weaving, spinning etc. They carried on cultivation in their own land holdings. During Ahom period a person's social status was determined on the basis of his position in the Paik system.

\textsuperscript{17} A. Guha, "Making of the Assamese Middle Class (1825-1905), An Unpublished paper Presented at the Seminar in Geography Department, NEHU, 1977.

\textsuperscript{**} Kanri Paiks rendered services as ordinary soldiers and labourers.
The social hierarchy of traditional Assamese society was feudal in nature. In the pre-British Assamese society between the Gogoriyas (privileged nobles) and the labouring Paiks, there was a group of people which included officers like Hazarikas, Salkias and Boras. They could not aspire to the hereditary privileges enjoyed by the nobles. But they did not have to do any state labour like the paiks. Therefore, their status in the society was such that they formed neither the upper class nor the lower class. In a sense they formed the basis of middle class in Assamese society. But they failed to emerge as a viable educated middle-class group at that time, since there was no scope in the old society for that. Though by and large they built up the foundation of middle class during Ahom rule, they were in a dormant stage at that time. During British rule, this group gathered more strength, became more articulate and emerged as a viable middle-class group.

The ranks of Boras, Salkias, Hazarikas could be found not only among the Hindus but it could be found among the Muslims also. Even in the present day Assamese society the Muslims take these titles. Generally, higher posts in the Ahom system of administration were filled up
by people belonging to nobility of the Ahom community. There were some posts which were occupied both by Ahoms as well as non-Ahoms. Many war prisoners of the Mughal army were absorbed in the military and civil administration of the Ahom government. They were given new ranks of Bora, Saikia, Hazarika along with their Islamic title.

A feudal social structure prevailed in pre-British Assamese society, despite its semi-tribal characteristics. As soon as the Ahoms entered Assam, they turned into feudatory lords. Only their descendants could occupy the institution of Kingship. People belonging to high caste formed upper stratum of the society and exploited and oppressed the lower class comprising mass of the people. The Servitors (likhaus or lagaus) were allotted as personal attendants to royal officers. There was a great gap between nobility and common people — the higher caste and lower caste, forming the upper class and lower class respectively.

THE BRITISH RULE

The entire Kingdom including the eastern and western half of the Brahmaputra Valley formally passed into the hands of the British after the conclusion of the Treaty of Tandaboo in 1826. King of Ava surrendered his claim over Assam, Cachar, Jaintia and Manipur to the British government. But the British did not take over the direct administration of the whole country at once. Immediately after the withdrawal of the Burmese, the British government restored Manipur to Gambhir Singh who became their vassal. The Calcutta authorities declared on the eve of the Anglo-Burmese war that they would retain no part of the Brahmaputra Valley and that they would establish in Assam a Government adapted to their wants and calculations. But despite their commitments, they brought lower Assam under their dominion in 1826, and by 1899 they succeeded in bringing the whole of Assam under their control.

During the early years of the British rule, the Ahom nobility protested against them when they lost almost all privileges. The group of people, who formed the upper stratum of the society in pre-British era

lost all their privileges and powers during colonial era.
The estates of the nobility were taken away by the British.
They were offered pension and offices of lower rank in
lieu of that. Since the position of the nobility was
lowered, they started revolting against the new regime.
In 1828 A.D., Ahom Prince, Gomadhar, and some other Ahom
nobles and officials after him made unsuccessful attempts
to drive out the British from Assam. The status of the
Paiks was raised to some extent with the abolition of the
feudal privileges of the Ahom nobility by the British. The
paiks were emancipated from their service. "By taking away
their Pykes and landed estates the upper classes in
society had been reduced to poverty and brought down to
the level of other poor people". The Ahom nobility were
adversely affected by the abolition of their privileges
by the British.

The Britishers annexed lower Assam first because
it was fertile and its agriculture was in improved
condition. They took seven years (1826 to 1833) to arrive
at a decision regarding the administration of upper
Assam. During 1824 to 1833, neither the Britishers nor
the old Ahom rulers administered upper Assam. In fact,

20. K.N. Dutta, Landseka of the Freedom Struggle in
Assam (Gauhati, 1956), p.16.
the system of Government during these nine years was neither wholly British nor Ahom. An admixture of both prevailed which led to a disorganized state of affairs. 21

This was a critical period for the people of upper Assam. However, this uncertainty ended with the installation of Purandar Singh as the King of upper Assam in 1833. But after a few years, the British Government began to find fault with his administration and dethroned him in 1838. Purandar Singh was pensioned off in 1838 and that area was also brought under British rule.

A few years after annexation of upper Assam, Sadiya and Matsak states of the Khantia were also brought under direct administration of the British. Both the states were clubbed together as district of Lakhimpur. Gradually, whole of Assam including the plains as well as the hill areas passed under the direct rule of the British. Assam was administered by Government of Bengal through a Commissioner till 1874.

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