Chapter 6

Naamghar- Economic Dimensions

Sources

The primary sources for the history of the period under study offers hardly any direct references to the economic developments of the region. We have to interpret the economic conditions from reading into the texts of the times. The Guru-Charits are generally euphoric about the spiritual fervor and zeal of the leaders to spread the Vaishnava religion. Data regarding economic development in the region appear in the background of the writings. Also the Burunji- historical documents of the Ahoms are a primary source. They provide in detail the chronicle of Ahom Kings and the administration of their domains.

The secondary sources of history of the medieval Assam give good collection of data from which one can develop a framework and evolve a history of the economic processes of the medieval period in Assam.

Manorama Sharma says about historiography of economic development of the region, “The main problem seems to be a lack of conceptual framework in writing of history which could provide a scientific paradigm for seeing history as the emergence and evolution of social processes. Because of this there has been an inability to see the link between the informations provided in the sources and the process of socio-economic formation. The dominant tendency is to tag along social and economic data as an
appendage to the administrative set-up.” She sees this as the greatest obstacle in the path of the development of a scientific socio-economic history of the region.¹

In the medieval period, thanks to the glorious epoch of the spread of Sankaradeva’s Naam Dharma, is a well-documented one. But very little significant use has been made of these vast stores of data by secondary sources for constructing a socio-economic history of the region.

The British, when they colonized Assam in 1826, had brought about far-reaching changes in the whole development of the region. It is left to the modern day historians to document the resultant demographic chaos, and study the reasons for the economic backwardness of the region.

**Living History**

There are quite a few pockets in the region which are a living heritage where the economics have tended to remain the same since 500 years. There are still many virgin areas where economic study has never been done. The technological developments therein, and their relation to society and economics of the region are still to be studied.

As of now, the sources documenting an integrated view of society, economy and culture is difficult to come by. Amalendu Guha’s ‘Planters Raj to Swaraj’ and a few other books stand out. For example, Qadri states in his interpretation that ‘though essentially feudal, the mode of production in Assam is very different from elsewhere in India in

Few have stated this truth so categorically and related it to analysis of how and why it is so different. Also he says ‘Colonialism made the indigenes all to a dead level. It built pockets of capitalism where locals had no place.’ Other historians too are now expressing these views, after a long period of euphoric writings on the much-trumpeted *Glorious Era of Assam Renaissance*.

**Economic Status in the early Ahom period**

When the Tai-Shan invaders entered Assam from Burma through the Patkai in the 12th century, they described the land as ‘Mung Dum chung Kham” meaning “land full of golden crops.” They subjugated the tribal populations of the area and established their rule. The Ahom Rule in Assam lasted 600 years - a larger span than any other ruling Dynasty in Indian History. This stability was obviously based on economic solvency, with plenty of surplus production.

Early Assam economics was very basic. Slowly, greater economic solvency was achieved, which is clearly reflected in the public works - large water tanks, roads, bridges, forts, ramparts and buildings like Rang-ghar, Kareng-ghar, Talaatal-ghar etc..

**The Nature of the Ahom Economy**

The first outstanding characteristic of the region is that the entire population engages in agriculture., ‘From the peasant to the nobility, all strata of people were engaged. Manual labour was never looked upon as a disgrace. Even artisans and crafts men ploughed their own fields’, says Sanjeeb Kakoty. Even women were included.‘Every woman should spin a copse of yarn and every man should weave a basket or sieve before going to bed. Every

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household should give one seer of silk to the royal store annually.’ This was a Royal
decree.

S Kakoty further quotes two instances found in the Burunjis to show Royal participation
in agriculture. –‘King Pratap Singha was engaged in planting saplings along the road
from Dalaugiri to Charaideo. Second, Parbatiya Raja received the information regarding
his accession to the throne when he was ploughing his farm. After he assumed the
Kingship, he is said to have preferred a life as a farmer to the intrigues of the Ahom
Court.’. ³

‘None of the Ahoms could be coerced to work. They worked only if they felt like. The
burunjis record that a borbarua was given an elephant along with his position . But the
Borbarua had great trouble to collect fodder for it. Once, on a rainy day when none came
to cut fodder, the borbarua was hard-pressed to gather it himself, and he returned the
elephant to the King and surrendered his post also. In such a situation, the mobilization
of labour was the crucial aspect of growth and development of the Economy.’. ⁴

Mobilization of Work-Force
The greatest economic success of the Ahoms was in mobilizing the entire population into
a great work-force in an ingenious manner. They established the Paik system.

King Pratap Singha (1603-41) appointed Momai Tamuli Bezbarua to conduct a census,
organize the population into villages by allotting them land, and grouping them under the
charge of a Barua, Borbarua, etc., a hierarchy of Ahom officials. A certain number of
villages were placed under each official, who would have to mobilize the work-forces as

⁴Ibid, p.99
per Royal demands. The system was comparable in a limited way, to the Mughal Mansabdari System.

Each household had to send one-fourths of its male population between the ages of 15 and 50 to serve as *paiks* (soldiers) under the King. Every four *Paiks* were considered as a *Got*. The four *paiks* in the *Got* had to serve the King for three months every year by rotation and the other three were responsible to take care of the serving *Paik’s* family and lands.

The *paiks* were paid no wages, but each was allotted a home-stead with a garden, and a quota of revenue-free land for wet rice cultivation.

**Wet –Rice Cultivation**

The success of the Ahoms in mobilizing labour made possible the wet-rice cultivation. And vice-versa. The Ahom migration into Assam brought wet-rice cultivation to Assam. Before them, the rice was cultivated by the ploughless tribes. Short variety of rice (*ahu-dhaan*), undulating land terrain, broadcasting of seed, slash and burn (jhum-cultivation), land rotation for fallowing, and use of hoe and digging sticks – these were the dominant features of the pre-Ahom agriculture of the indigenes.

Ahoms were a segment of the Tai-Shaans living in Burma. They had a fairly uniform culture based on wet-rice cultivation. Writing about the Shaans in Burma in the 19th century, Leach says, ‘Their settlements occur along river valleys in pockets of level country in the hills. Such settlements are always found associated with irrigated wet paddy land.”

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5 *Ibid., Loc.cit.*
Thus, the Ahoms were plough-using wet-rice cultivators with knowledge of higher agriculture technology of transplantation. They par-boiled rice for longer shelf life, they made *konal-chawal* (soft-rice) a variety which becomes soft and edible on soaking for 2 hours. It was used by them for carrying to their farm and on travelling.

The labour mobilized by the Ahoms from the local population was utilized for wet-rice cultivation. This was a crucial aspect of their economic development. The *Paik System* ensured the spread of wet-rice cultivation and continued availability of a work-force. The man-power net-work pool was utilized, during peace-time, for tasks of reclamation of land for wet-rice cultivation, construction of and maintenance of extensive embankments, networks for water control and distribution. All this facilitated extension of wet-rice cultivation. *This prime land was given free of revenue to the cultivators in lieu of their physical service to the King only.*

Thus, under the Ahoms, diverse food-gathering groups were brought into the fold of a single production process. The role of Wet-rice cultivation in the development of the Ahom State is emphasized by Amalendu Guha. The increased production enabled surplus generation and sustenance of a growing population and developing political structure. The bureaucratic machinery was elaborated for purpose of mobilizing man-power and militia.

Communal ownership of land was the accepted norm. Dykes were built, land drained and reclaimed, protected against floods , all collectively. Hence, work-sharing between families was accepted as a norm. Technology was shared and developed. No agricultural treatises are available, but common sayings abound. For example:

*“Satey Patol, Paasey Ghun, Chaey hatey tamul nadan badan.”*  
**Five are too close. Seven too far. Six hands apart, the aracanut trees thrive best.**
‘Ahu rubaa khujot buri, Sali rubaa gegot juri”

Sow the Ahu (rice) in ankle deep water, sow the Sali(rice)

five inches apart.

---Dakor Basan- (Sayings of Dak).

Extension of Wet-rice cultivation was thus crucial for development of Ahom State and monarchy. **It most importantly provided political legitimacy for the Ahoms to rule during the period when many communities were vying for power and dominance in the valley.**

### Taxation in the Ahom Period

It is generally thought that taxation during Ahom regime which ranged over six centuries (1228-1826 AD) was heavy and oppressive Many scholars have attempted to deduce that the Mayamara rebellion, which broke out in the end of 17th century and beginning of 18th century, was due to the general resentment of the people to the all-pervasive land-assessment, compulsory physical service, other taxes and the cruel punitive measures. There was no escape for the common man from these measures in this neatly organized polity.

For instance, if one cleared new land other than the two puras of paddy-land given, one had to pay one or two rupees for a pura, but the land could be thus held only till such land was not settled on the Paik-system. In the inundated parts, emigrating ryots who cultivated there had to pay a plough tax. Hill-tribes who grew cotton had to pay home-

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tax. Non-cultivating artisans had to pay higher rate of poll-tax, amounting to five rupees for gold-washers, braziers, and three rupees for oil-pressers and fishermen.\(^8\)

**Land-Grants by Ahom Kings**

Ahom Kings under the influence of priests from Bengal, Vaishnavite Gurus, etc. made extensive grants of tax-free lands.

Amalendu Guha says “Such large grants of lands and paiks to Sattras, temples and individuals resulted in severe erosion of the resource base of the State.

The time came when the resources mobilized by the paiks and Khels became inadequate.

The taxations and punitive system of the Ahoms is reflected in a long list of such measures in the royal inscriptions, from which measures the land or people given out are exempted. Such a list is available in the inscription for Land grant of Kamakhya, Pandunatha and Ugratara temples, issued on behalf of King Sivasingha (1719-1744 AD) for the first time. It enumerates the dues and liabilities of the subjects (from which the granted people are exempt):

1) *Kar*- general land revenue
2) *Katal*- tax paid by a Paik in case he cannot render physical service
3) *Pad*- tax to be paid on employment as an officer
4) *Panchak*- compulsory contributions to be paid on certain occasions
5) *Beth*- money in substitute for responsibility of catching elephants, buffaloes, etc. for State
6) *Begar*- is substitute in coin for buying exemption from physical labor when asked by King.
7) *Jalkar*- tax for fishing in lakes, rivers
8) *Yavakshara*- money paid for exemption to supply nitre
9) *Chor*- Fine for thieving

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 158
10) Dhumuchi- confistication of property which cannot be inherited by anybody
11) Marecha-Tax for land used for marriage ceremonies
12) Chinala-fine for adultery
13) Dana- ferry tax for plying boat on river
14) Khut- tax on properties other than land
15) Danda-Tax paid on exemption from punishment
16) Hat- tax on buying and selling in marketplace
17) ghat- tax on ferry crossing, etc.

It should be evident from the list above that tax levies were wide and all-pervasive. ⁹

But there were privileged persons who were free from the burden of taxes.

Large estates were granted to ministers and first relations of kings. They were cultivated by paiks and likshaws available to them. They paid no tax.

There were Brahmoter, Devotter and Dharmottar lands granted to Brahmin and non-brahmin priests, which they could cultivate, using slaves, or paiks.

Muslim holy men enjoyed Nankar land, granted through charters which was revenue free..

There were also some Gentlemen (bhal-manuh) who were exempted from tax in lieu of physical service. They only had to pay one tola of gold to a new king for which they received a suit of dress as a royal present. They enjoyed revenue free land called bhal-manuhiya mati(Kamrupiya Burunji by S K Bhuyan). ¹⁰

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⁹ Ibid, p. 99
¹⁰ Ibid., p. 159-160
It was left to the common people to bear the burden of taxes. In order to escape this heavy burden of taxes and weight of physical service to some officers, they preferred to sell themselves as bondmen or slaves (bandhi, bandha, golaam) to nobles and rich people who would treat them kindly and generally shelter them from fiscal pressures. As Gait says, “they were bought and sold openly, the price ranging from about twenty rupees for an adult male to three rupees for a low caste girl.” It is strange that people should prefer slavery to free citizenship. But that only goes to show the harshness of tax levies and personal service with no certainty of kindness from changing masters.

Some people escaped the burden of tax and compulsory physical service by taking a vow of celibacy and cloistered life in Vaishnava Sattras. The Sattras harboured a vast population of monks in their establishments, who lived on the charity of Kings, nobles and their laity. They were generally not disturbed by the rulers except once by King Gadadhar Singha (1603-17) who ordered the thousands of cloistered monks of Kala-Sanghati to work on road-building work.

**Economics of Neo-Vaishnavism in the Valley-16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries**

The period of rapid growth of the Sattra traditions in Assam exactly coincides with the period of establishment of the Ahom village settlements which was the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Assam to mid-17<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid, p.160


<sup>13</sup> M Neog, *op.cit.*, p. 160-161
The Great Saints Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva had brought about a Cultural Renaissance with a motive to unite the diverse warring populations under a common culture of Naam-Dharma. The political and economic developments of the Ahom Rulers beginning in the late 16th and through the 17th century was an additional powerful socio-economic force acting on the people. History unfolds the resultant of these two forces.

The Ahom Kings had to fight many wars against the aggressive Mughals to defend their independence. The contest ended with the decisive battle of Saraighat in the year 1671, when the entire Brahmaputra valley upto Goalpara in the West and Sadiya in the east came under the rule of the Ahom Kingdom. The Muslims lost their power to the British, who did not seem to concern themselves with Assam until much later.

Hence this was a peaceful situation and it created atmosphere for growth of the Sattras of the Neo-Vaishnavites.

The Sattraadhikars, particularly the Brahmins of the Brahma Sanghati (a group of Sattras), due to manuovering themselves into positions as Gurus of the Royalty, secured for themselves an enormous amount of wealth and influence. They began to exercise their influence on the people. No one dared to challenge the decree of the Sattradhikars. All the people paid the Guru-kar (tax to the Guru). With such a great power and influence as that exercised by the spiritual leaders over the subjects, it was not surprising that the royalty, in turn did not oppose the Sattradhikars and wooed them with them more and more gifts.

Slowly, the Sattras acquired a feudal outlook. Prof. D Nath writes ‘ With large areas of revenue-free lands at their disposal and sufficient number of tenants to work thereon, a feudal relationship was created between them’ 14 D. Nath quotes the Tungkhungia Burunji

14 D Nath, Satras in Colonial Assam, ICHR, Nort-east Regional Centre, Guwahati, Assam,2007, p.42
stating that the Auniati and Dakhinpat Sattradhikar’s lifestyles resembled that of the Ahom Kings. They had even their Cabinet-ministers. When they travelled, they did so in expensive ‘panchoi’ (small ship). They sat on silver Simhasanas (throne)\textsuperscript{15}

Sattra- head-ship became hereditary. In order to expand their reach, scions of the Sattradhikars family were sent to virgin areas to establish new Sattras, and claim the discipleship of more people. There was a rush for the establishing of Sattras with the various schisms vying with each other to ‘capture’ the areas. The unseemly fracas wherein a Sattradhikar was murdered by a rival claimant (Bordowa Sattra) to the headship exposes the un- spiritual motives of the spiritual heads.

The Sattras closed ranks. Membership of monkhood in Sattras became caste-based. Lower castes were not permitted to become monks in the Brahmin Sattras. The Brahmin Sattras even observed untouchability.

There was mutual and tacit co-operation between the Sattras and the Royal Authorities. There was interference of the Brahmin Sattradhikars in the affairs of the Royal Court. ‘This sowed seeds of dissent amongst the Ahom nobles. A rival alien Brahmin, Krishnaram Bhattacharya by name, from Nabadvip, Bengal, was brought in by vested interests and the alien element was established with vast land-grants in the Ahom Kingdom.’\textsuperscript{16}

Another major sphere of influence was created by a rival faction of non-Brahmin Vaishnavites under the Mayamara Sattra. They did not get land grants from the Kings as

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p.43

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, p.16
they included non-brahmins. But the tithe paid to the Sattra by their disciples filled their coffers to the brim. So much so that the Mayamara Junior Sattradhikar said ‘no one except the Ahom king can equal the wealth of this Sattra.’\(^{17}\) Their membership strength lay in the lower castes, and also some rival dissenting members of Royalty.

‘There was already dissatisfaction amongst the people on account of the all-pervasive system of taxation and cruel, unjust punitive measures; the common man preferred to be a slave in a kind master’s house rather than a free citizen with burden of taxes, physical service, fines and punishments. Added to this was a simmering discontent amongst the royal princes, some of whom were deliberately physically hurt and thereby, rendered unfit for the throne.’\(^{18}\)

Just as the rise of Ahom Rule went side by side with the growth of Sattras, we see that the undermining of Royal Ahom authority coincided with the fall of the domination of Sattradhikars.

The matters were brought to a head when the Kala-Sanghati Gurus acquired sufficient wealth and power to challenge the Royalty and resulted in the protracted Civil war known now as the Mayamara rebellion.

### Causes of the Mayamara Rebellion

The Paik and Khel system had some basic flaws and combined with the spread of the people power of the Sattras, an explosive situation was created. The results of the Paik and Khel systems were several. The positive points were:

- It institutionalised the system of extraction of labour power and laid economic foundation of state in medieval Assam.

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., *loc.cit.*

\(^{18}\) M. Neog, , *op.cit.*, p.152
• It broke exclusive tribal-ethnic social formations and brought the diverse groups under one advanced agricultural system.

• By doing away with tribal mode of production, it opened the way for feudal relations to develop.

• It ushered in a measure of uniformity to the society and built a system of social security for the individual members to fall back upon.

• By ensuring 2 puras of valuable ‘sale’ paddy land to each Paik, the system established a definite relation between the Paik farmer and his land. Though he could not sell or transfer this land, there was no bar to his enjoying this land as long as he remained a member of the Khel. Again, although his progeny did not directly inherit his land, they were always ensured of 2 puras of land from the Khel when they came of age and became members of the same or a different Khel. That right over homestead and garden land, though not inheritable initially or transferable, became more or less proprietorial and heritable with passage of time.

Types of Paiks

Chamua Paiks’ were higher class. They belonged to old Ahom noble families or families of conquered chieftains etc. They were exempted from labour service by payment of commutation tax.

The ‘Lickchows’ or Kanri Paiks were very small or marginal farmers,. They had to do cultivation work. They had to procure their own food and they were paid nothing for their labour.
Basic cause of the revolt was economic. The immediate cause was religious persecution of the Maomaria Vaishnavite Gurus. Although started by the Marans, later it was a truly mass uprising all live Kayasthas, Ahoms, Chitias, Kachari, fisherman etc.

The condition of the people as reflected in literature

“The Guru–Charits give a picture of the political and economic conditions of the state as a background to the lives of the great Saints of Assamese Renaissance. They preserved the memories of material distress and consequent mental agonies in the different stages of the life of Madhavadeva. Other literary works of the period also can offer glimpses to understand the prevalent mental conditions of the people. The Nama-Ghosha by Madhavadeva, for instance, seems to represent the experiences of generations of suffering men.

“Dr Bani Kanta Kakoti finds the Nama Ghosha reverberating with notes of a profound world-weariness, disenchantment and a sense of unworthiness”… Hiren Gohain reads into the Naam-Ghosha the expressions of the sufferings of the people of that period. “It is possible that at the time of the advent of Sankaradeva and his Bhakti Movement there was wide-spread economic distress and social upheaval due to coercive imposition of feudalism and extremely restricted growth of commodity production”. They had no choice but to work for the King. Often, in a Got (group of four Paiks), as wars had to be fought so often, three out of the four were sent up for service of the King. This surely would have caused mental agony to the entire population.

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20 Ibid. p. 32
“… aches and the longings expressed in the verses of the Naam-Ghosh do not have a personal accent … rather, the woes, the pain and despair of the lost, comfortless souls appear to represent the pulse of the people of Medieval Assam.”

Perhaps this was the reason the population in thousands thronged the Naamghars and Sattras to seek solace by singing the Praise of God in the Naamghar.

A similar dismal picture emerges from a totally different view point expressed by the writings of the invaders of the land.. Shihabbudin Talishq, who accompanied the great General Mir Jumla in his invasion of Ahom Kingdom in 1652, notes that “the King neither allows foreigners to enter the land nor permits any subject to go out of it… If this country were administered like the imperial dominions it is very likely that 40-45 lakhs of rupees would be collected as revenue.”21 Talish also noted the insignificant difference between towns and villages and that no food items except betal-nut was sold on the streets. There were no markets as the entire population of the valley were drawn into wet rice cultivation and could produce no surplus as they had only two puras of land., and they spent most of their time in service of the King.As all were agriculturists, none were traders.

As there were no big cities or towns, there existed no large non-productive consuming class demanding supply of products from rural and urban areas.It was only Kamrup which gave some incentive to trade and commerce as it bordered on Bengal..22

Economic conditions in 17th century Eastern Assam

Thus, it is seen that Medieval Assam, in relative isolation from the rest of India, had a unique socio-economic structure. The simple village economy was almost entirely self-sustaining even though it may not have been self-sufficient. Apart from salt, which was imported from Bengal, most other requirements were produced locally. Agriculture was the mainstay of the people and communal ownership of land was the basic feature of this agricultural economy. Each peasant cultivator (paik) in the village had private proprietary rights only over homesteads and gardens but not over the wet paddy-lands. The King as the general representative of the community, generally established his claim to ownership over all communal wet paddy lands and waste lands. Land revenue consisted in the personal labor service of the peasant-paiks. Paiks could also acquire inferior land if he desired. Additional wet-paddy land also was allotted to them in certain cases.

The King disbursed agricultural lands to certain people like nobilities, priests, and vassal-chiefs, who could cultivate them by deploying paiks.

Trade and Industry

Another important feature of the rural Assamese society was the fact that although they were primarily agriculturists, they combined agriculture with other trades. There are many references to weavers, gold-smiths, bell-metal artisans, potters, boat-makers etc. Almost all these people were self-employed and manufactured their products in their own homes, generally for their own use. There was very little specialization and indigenous crafts and industries were integral part of every household.

Generally each village was self-sustaining and its autonomy was a significant feature of the Medieval Assamese society. Unlike in other parts of India, no man was attached to any particular trade in such a way as to tie him down to a particular community. Thus,
so far as practice of any trade was concerned there was considerable flexibility in the social structure.

Within this overall framework of a subsistence economy, where surplus was limited, the scope for trade was naturally very restricted. In the absence of a monetary economy, **barter was the prevailing mode of transaction.**

Shihabbudin Talishq commented in 1660-65, “the only traders in the bazaar are the betal-nut sellers. It is not their practice (of the Assamese) to buy and sell food articles in the market-place. The inhabitants store in their houses one years supply of foods of all kinds and are under no necessity to buy or sell any food articles.”

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**Barter Fairs**

Although basically isolationist, the Ahom Kings encouraged trade to a limited extent so that people of the neighbouring countries could frequent them with commodities and thereby they could get a steady income through custom duties and market revenues. This trade was accomplished through an organized market system (mela or Fairs) in the land adjoining foothills and plains passing through the *Duars* (openings in the foot-hills) in the North Eastern and North-Western borders of Assam Valley and also with the Southern hills.

One of the Melas still in existence since Ahom times is the Jon-Bil mela near Nowgong held every year in month of January. It is still a barter mela and to this day, no monetary transactions are done.

(See Note on Jon-Beel Mela at the end of the Chapter)

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For the Ahom government, the frontier trade, which formed the plains-hills contact was not only a source of revenue, but an assertion of their power beyond the physical limits of their Kingdom. Trade with Bengal was limited to a single item of import-salt against various forest products from Assam.

**Role of British in disempowering of Assamese people**

When the British occupied Assam after the Treaty of Yandaboo, which freed Assam from Burmese occupation, they found the region in condition of total disruption and turmoil. The administration of the Ahom Kings was non existant, the economy was in shambles and over-all picture was one of loot, plunder and decay. The country was depopulated. Yet, the British decided to stay on. The reason was its economic potential.

The British brought in dramatic and rapid changes to Assam. All the activities were geared to industrialization.

In the face of an onslaught of cheap industrial goods from England, the technologically backward local industries did not stand a chance. The indigenous Arts and Crafts produced by the peasants had no buyers. It became increasingly difficult for the people to hold on to their technologically inferior indigenous crafts and within a short time, the peasants lost their subsidiary income from them. The people had no option but to use the imported products. Thus the Assamese became dependant for the simplest industrial products on outside traders.

An event of profound significance was the discovery of a superior quality of tea plant in Assam. Introduced in 1839, it was, by 1870, the most important cash crop. Assam Tea Company was the pioneer Tea producer outside China, which had had a monopoly so far.

The second significance was availability of labour for work on tea-plantations, building of roads and railways which were executed at a great pace.
W W Hunter notes in his report, “Considerable difficulty is experienced in obtaining labour for works on roads and other Govt. works even at double the rates. This apparent anomaly is explained by Mr Campbell, Asst. Commissioner, Govt. “Workmen are looked upon as impressed labour. Even if offered double the wages, they are disinclined to work as it lowers their social position. It is the object of every ryot to secure the appellation of ‘bhala manus’ or Gentleman-farmer.”

The truth is that they were living almost as bonded labour to the King for so many years. Having been freed from that they did not look favourably on working as labour for the Authorities. They preferred to cultivate their own land and live in peace.

Meanwhile, motivated by the intention of attracting European planters, the regulations were designed by the British to establish a new industrial economy in the region. Due to the paucity of local labor, immigration from tribal belts of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh was encouraged. The Assamese people lost their opportunity. No jobs in the tea, coal, or railways came their way.

Large amounts of waste-lands, much in excess of what was required, was all acquired by the Company. The tribal communities lost their lands. Makiko Kimura made a study of how the tribals came to lose their land. Since the establishment of Forest Department in Assam in 1874, the shifting cultivation (jhum cultivation) by the tribals was considered as the chief danger to the forest in hill areas. (Jhum involves burning down of the forest, cultivation in the clearing and then moving to another site by

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The British govt. suggested to induce the tribals to plant timber trees in jhummed areas employing them as labours in Forest Dept. Later, however, they reversed their policy and prohibited tribals from living in ‘reserved’ forests by using jhum cultivation. The plains, on the other hand, saw a tremendous increase in population through the influx of immigrants from East Bengal. They bought the lands and obtained pattas. The tribals were thus marginanized in their own land.”

The systematic revenue maximization by the British Govt. was not matched by giving any support to the peasants to increase production. Hunter’s observation in 1874 A.D. that there were no irrigation facilities, that manure was not used, rotation of crops was unknown, also held true at the turn of the century. No action was taken against recurring floods. In spite of there being no change in crop pattern, revenue was increased. Additional taxes like grazing tax, excise on Opium, affected the economic condition of the ryots, resulting in agricultural stagnation.

This caused reduction in production of rice. The Govt. offered various incentives to immigrants from East Bengal to colonise the waste-lands. There was tremendous influx of immigrants. A demographic imbalance was produced.

“This important factor which determines growth of a city is the construction of roads and railways. The railway Junctions like Lumding and Tinsukia emerged as trading centres where trade was in the hands of Marwari businessmen or Beparis from Dacca. Older towns of Assam like Sualkuchi, Baligaon, and Barpeta were completely by-passed.

25 Makiko Kimura, We lost land: land alienation among tribes of Assam, ICHR, NE Regional Centre, Guwahati, 2008, p.9
26 Prof. P. Goswami, Colonial Assam, Trade, Development and Dependance., ICHR, NE Regional Centre, Guwahati, 2008, p.17

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Role of the *Sattras* in economics of Assam

The world outside the *Sattras* may have undergone a sea of changes, like a series of natural and political calamities which caused virtual breakdown of the economy of the region. Over a million people had died in the Civil War in the last part of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century had seen the harrowing invasion of Assam by Burmese militia, when another million people were either killed or taken prisoner to Burma. The putrification of dead led to epidemics of cholera, Kala-azar, and again denuded the remaining population. It was followed by British colonization, which further retarded their chances for a prosperous economic condition.

The Sattras too played a negative role during the period of British rule. From the time following the Cultural Renaissance, the various tribal and non-tribal groups had emerged as a people calling themselves as ‘Asamiya’ or Assamese, united solely by the culture and language introduced to them by Sankaradeva. The people had experienced a brief period of peace and prosperity guided by the religious minded Apostles of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and their direct disciples.

But this period was all too brief. *Sattras* and *Sattradhikars* were so much revered by the common people, that they were showered with honour and material goods. Then the Ahom Kings patronized them with immense land-grants. The *Sattradhikar’s* position became a power hot-spot.

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Political machinations by various power-centres had led to a total socio-economic collapse in the region.

**Indigenous Industries in Assam**

The local industries and crafts in Assam remained under-developed and with low-technology, on account of lack of incentive for further demand beyond certain level of local consumption. The policy of subsistence economy was one in which all efforts are directed towards producing goods enough for local consumption only.\(^{28}\). Occupational groups such as cobblers, barbers did not exist.

It is to be noted that almost all requirements of life- food, dress, shelter for sustaining life was produced locally. The picture noted by foreigners is almost idyllic. In no way did Assam present a picture of poverty or deprivation.

Notes W. W. Hunter –“The people as a rule, are remarkably well-off. They are easily able to raise sufficient for their own requirements from their plot of cultivation. Hired labour is difficult to find.” (As mentioned earlier, the tribal culture of helping each other still is prevalent in the villages) “Wherever I go, I am struck with the look of real comfort about the homesteads. The peasantry are well-to-do and rich in possession of a goodly stock of this world’s goods”\(^{29}\)

**Local Industries**

Artisans and crafts men practiced their industries in their own home, mostly for local consumption. Brass and Bell-metal was formed into vessels for eating and serving food.

\(^{28}\) H K Borpujari, *op.cit.*, p.116
\(^{29}\) W. W. Hunter, *op. cit.* p.189
The metals were probably imported from Bengal. No information is available in early sources. References are found of such articles that came to be used only in 16th century.

The main centres of production was in Sarthebari in Barpeta and Morabazar in Sibsagar dist. And Titabor is also famous for bell-metal works.\(^{30}\)

**Wood-crafts**

Woodcraft in general attained some degree of excellence. Wood articles produced were unpretentious and simple, mainly used in Naamghars. The Guru-Aasan, Figures of gods and goddesses, carvings on doors, pillars and walls, household furnitures like beds, stools, palanquins, boats etc were carved decoratively.\(^{31}\)

**Art of Weaving**

The elaborately dressed persons appearing in illustrated manuscripts and painted frescoes on Naamghar walls depict officials, priests, and Royalty whose need of cloth was catered to by professional weavers from Tantikuchi, Hajo or Sualkuchi. Rest all made their own cloth. Dyes were derived from roots, herbs, bark of trees, majithi, leteku leaves, mishimitita, Roots of asokath, turmeric, thekera were also used.\(^{32}\)

**Brick-making**

The Ahom bricks, remarkable on account of their thinness, are bright in color, and very hard too. The bricks were treated with buffalo blood after baking. Ahoms made excellent

\(^{30}\) S. K. Phukan *Toponomy of Assam*, op. cit., p.302

\(^{31}\) H. K. Borpujari, *op. cit.*, p. 115

plaster using molasses, matimah, lime from mollusks, fish oil, etc. which has endured the wear and tear of centuries. 33

**Extraction of Gold**

The river Subansiri (Suvarnasiri) in the region called Suwarnapith in ancient times had gold flowing in the sands. The gold was extracted by the Sonowal tribes who lived on the banks of this river by the use of mercury. It is not known where mercury was obtained.

It is deduced by the researcher that gold extraction was controlled by the Ahom Kings by controlling the supply of pure Mercury which was essential for the extraction of gold. It is mentioned in the book ‘**Medieval Assamese society**’ by Sarbeswar Rajguru, that “quick-silver (mercury) was kept in the centre of the Jaysagar Tank to purify the waters”34. This tank is a feat of engineering built by the Ahom engineers of King Jayadhwaja Singha (1672-1693). He also states that it is not known from where Mercury was obtained. Perhaps it was kept closely-guarded in the well lying in centre of the Jaysagar tank.

It is well-known that *Hengul* (cinnabar- ore of mercury) was used to obtain red pigment for the manuscript illustrations in the Sattras. According to oral evidence obtained from

the artisans living in the Sattra at Majuli, the Cinnebar was obtained by barter from the Nepali traders in the market. **They surely knew how to smelt mercury from cinnabar.**

William Robinson gives details of how gold is extracted by the Sonowal tribes using Mercury (quick-silver)-“Quicksilver is rotated in a pan with water and gold- sand mixture. Then the lump of mercury and gold is placed in a snail shell and burnt in a miniature charcoal kiln. The quicksilver evaporates , the shell turns into lime. It is then dropped into water where the lime dissolves and the lump of gold sinks with a clink to the bottom.”

Gold-dust was also an item of barter for the traders from Bhutan.viz. “Export from Assam(Bijni) was lac, muga silk, Endi silk cloth, dry fish. Imports from Bhutan included Woolen cloth, **Gold-dust**, salt, musk, horses, Chamor (yak-tail), and Chinese silks.” This shows that gold was extracted in Nepal and Bhutan too.

The Ahom king was defeated by the Mayamara rebels The group who had lakhs of followers, claimed to be very rich. Perhaps they got their hands on the gold, . It is mentioned in the Charit-Puthis that the Kaal-Sanghati Sattras had **Bamboo baskets full of gold**. These were perhaps just gold contributed by the tribals to their Guru.

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36 Francis Hamilton *An Account of Assam*, (1809),Pub. by Departmentof Historical and Antquarian Studies, Assam,1963,p.56
Economic conditions- early 19th century

Sources for Economic dimensions are plenty after this phase. The revenue-hungry British kept meticulous records of their incomes, and economic policies. The entry of the British forced a monetized economy on the population. The British did their best to squeeze enough revenue out of the land to pay for the administration.

But they took the easy way. The industries of Tea, Coal, Oil, and iron introduced by the British did not benefit the local people except for the infrastructure. It led to influx of a huge alien population causing demographic imbalances which till today disturbs the people of Assam.

The accumulation of capital in Britain had been very rapid in the 18th century. They had made large profits out of products brought from India and sold to Europe. The alliance in England between money and power resulted in their preoccupation with the “need to raise revenue and keep order”. Large areas were acquired and opened up and new markets and sources of raw materials were exploited by them.

Trade- routes through Assam

The flourishing trade with Tibet was blocked as Nepal went into Gorkha hands. Tibet paid in gold and silver for their imports from England. Also trade with China was an enticing prospect. An alternate route to Tibet and China through Assam became an urgent necessity.

The treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 established the British in Assam, Manipur, Cachar and Jaintiya. The control of trade-routes to Bhutan, Tibet, China and Burma followed soon thereafter. Meanwhile, R B Pemberton in his lengthy Report on Eastern Frontier of
British India (1835) had given details of the military and commercial routes that connected Bengal with Bhutan, Sikkim, China and Burma through the North-east of India.

British commercial enterprisers were excited at the prospect of getting thousands of new customers for the industrial products of Lancashire, Manchester and Yorkshire. Also Assam was seen as the rich hinterland of Bengal. With these intentions, the beginning of the 20th century saw the Company embark on a determined penetration of the forbidding isolated country of Assam.

On this forbidding note, the 18th century came to an end.
Note on Jon-Beel Mela (Barter Mela)

Jon Beel Mela - For 5 days in Month of January, The Tiwa, Karbi, Khasi, and Jaintia tribes come down from the hills to barter food items from locals in the plains of Dayang Belguri, at Jagiroad, 32km from Guwahati. No monetary transactions are done. They bring turmeric, ginger, fresh vegetables and take Pithas, puffed rice and paddy, flattened rice, and dried fish. The tribal King collects taxes from the people. Dances and tribal music set festive note to this ancient winter Mela.\(^{37}\)

\(^{37}\) (Internet- www.locateindia.com)