INTRODUCTION

The state of Assam lies in the North-East corner of the Republic of India. It is situated between 28\textdegree N. and 24\textdegree N. latitudes, and 89\textdegree E. and 96\textdegree E. longitudes, comprising the valley of the Brahmaputra, the valley of the Barak (the Surma), and the intervening hills known as the Assam Range. The valley of the Brahmaputra which extends for about 600 Km, comprises the present districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh with a total area of 56,339 sq.km. The valley of the Barak which is a flat plain includes the district of Cachar with a total area of 6,962 sq.km. In the intervening hilly region lies the districts of North Cachar and Mikir Hills, covering an area of 15,212 sq.km.

The area which comes under the purview of the present study comprises the territorial limits of the Ahom kingdom which roughly covered the present districts of the Brahmaputra valley except Goalpara.* On the north it is surrounded by the hills inhabited by the Bhutias, the Akas, the Duflas, the Ahors, and the Miris. On the north-east, the hill ranges inhabited by the Mishmis, the Khamtis and the Singphos separate Assam from China and Burma. Cachar and the State of Manipur are situated

*Although geographically Goalpara belongs to Brahmaputra Valley it remained within Bengal till 1872, and was under "Permanent Settlement" since 1793. Before 1822 it formed a part of the
on the south-east corner of her boundary. On the southern frontier there lies the so-called Assam Range occupied by the Nagas, the Jayantias, the Khasis and westward in succession, the Garos. Of the hills those in the north rise like a level wall abruptly from the plains; and on the south they consist of a succession of plateaus, most of which are intersected by river channels and covered with dense forest. Contact with the neighbouring hills was maintained through numerous passes, and the river Brahmaputra formed the highway of communication with the rest of India. But while a journey through the mountain passes was extremely difficult navigation along the Brahmaputra before the age of steam was always uncertain and at times immeasurably hazardous. Thus Assam remained practically isolated from the rest of the world.

The valley is divided in its whole course by the great river Brahmaputra from which it derives its name. The two parts thus divided are called Uttarkul or North Bank and Dakshinkul or South Bank. In the lower portion it lies almost east and west; but in its upper half it bends somewhat towards the north-east. Running through the centre of the valley the Brahmaputra receives in its course a large number of affluents descending from the hills on either side. Some of the principal tributaries on the north bank are the Dihang, Subansiri, Bharali, district of Rangpur. In that year it was erected into a separate district comprising the thanas of Goalpara, Dhubri and Karaibari.
Dhansiri, Baranadi, Manas with its tributaries, the Ai, the Champamati, Saralbhanga and Sankosh; on the south the greater affluents are the Noa Dihing, Buri Dihing, Disang, Dikhow, Jhanzi and another Dhansiri. Some of the tributaries are snow fed, but most of them, particularly those of the south, depend on monsoon for their volume. They are dried up during winter, but when heavy rains sets in they swell up and being unable to carry off the torrents of water suddenly overflow their banks. Heavy floods and inundations are, therefore, of frequent occurrence in Assam. Famine from draught was a rarity in the province; but fever and other diseases habitual to moist climate are prevalent. Malaria was once common; small-pox, dysentery, kalazar (black fever) took away heavy toll of human lives.

The soil is exceedingly fertile and well adopted to all kinds of agricultural products. For the most part it is composed of a "rich black loam, reposing on a gray sandy clay, though occasionally consisting of a light yellow clayish texture." The principal crops hitherto raised were rice, pulses, sugar-cane, rape and mustard. Rice being the staple food of the people, the major part of the cultivated land was devoted to the cultivation of paddy. It falls under three heads, sali or transplanted rice, bao or a long-stemmed variety of rice, and
ahu or autumn rice. Of the other produce, mention may be made of sugarcane, turmeric, ginger, long-pepper, mustard seed and plant like plantain, pumpkin, betel-nut, betel-leaf, etc. The forests are abound with valuable timbers such as aloe wood (agaru), sandal wood, sal, nahar etc. Bamboo and cane are also largely grown in the forests.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

This magnificent valley, prior to the advent of the British, was ruled by the Ahoms, an off-shot of the Tai or the great Shan stock of South-East Asia. Early in the thirteenth century Sukapha, a Shan prince of Upper Burma, penetrated into the valley with a vast army through the Patkai hills, and after defeating the Morans, the Borahis and other tribes carved out a principality of his own at the extreme end of the valley. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries Sukapha and his successors were mainly busy in consolidating their authority over the original inhabitants of the region. The expansion of the kingdom actually began from the sixteenth century when the Ahom king Suhungmung (1497-1539) annexed the territory of the Chutias centering round their capital Sadiya. He also defeated the Kacharis and the Bhuyans on the west and extended

kingdom beyond the Dhansiri valley. Further expansion of the kingdom, however, came to a halt with the rise of the Koches in early sixteenth century.

In the beginning of the seventeenth century the supremacy of the Ahoms was challenged by the Mughals who had then occupied the eastern part of the Koch kingdom commonly known as Koch-Hajo. The Ahom-Mughal conflict began when the Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-1641) gave shelter to Balinarayan, the fugitive prince of Koch-Hajo, and formally reinstated him as the ruler of Darrang. In the first phase of the war Ahoms were defeated by the Mughals who occupied Kamrup or the western division of Assam. Before long the Ahoms drove back the Mughals beyond the river Manah; but in 1662, the Mughals under Mirjumla not only recovered their lost possessions but advanced as far as Gargaon, the capital of the kingdom and forced the Ahom ruler to cede Kamrup. The hostilities with the Mughals continued with occasional breaks until the reign of Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696) who had expelled the invaders in 1682, and extended the boundary of his territory upto the river Manah. The salient features of the fiscal administration of the Mughals took deep root in Kamrup since it was held by them over two decades.

1. Ibid., p. 4
From the middle of the eighteenth century the Ahom monarchy was on the decline. The throne was occupied by a number of weak and unscrupulous rulers, and internecine strife and dissensions became the order of the day. Taking advantage of the weakness of the monarch, the Moamarias, a religious sect, rose up in revolt and drove Gaurinath Singha (1780-1794), the reigning monarch to Gauhati. The fugitive king tried to restore order with the help of the neighbouring princes, but his call for assistance fell flat in the ears of the vassal chiefs who never failed to fish in the troubled waters. The Raja had, therefore, no other alternative but to appeal for aid to Lord Cornwallis, the Governor-General of India.1

The authorities of the East India Company had already interested themselves in the commercial possibilities of the North-East Frontier. Gaurinath's appeal for aid, therefore, presented to the Governor-General an opportunity to collect information about the interior of Assam. In 1872 Cornwallis deputed Captain Welsh to assist the Ahom monarch in restoring peace and order and reinstating him on the throne. Welsh re-established the authority of Gaurinath on the throne, and in return the latter concluded a commercial treaty (28 February 1793) establishing reciprocity and liberty of trade between

1. Lahiri, R.M., The Annexation of Assam (1824-1854), 1975, p. 4
Bengal and Assam. Sir John Shore, Cornwallis's successor, in pursuance of his policy of non-intervention recalled Welsh, and Assam was allowed to relapse to her former anarchy and confusion. The situation became so much alarming that Raja Gaurinath had to remove himself to Jorhat where he died in December, 1794. During the reign of his successors Kamaleswar (1795-1810) and particularly Chandrakanta (1810-1818) matter drifted from bad to worse. The court was divided into two hostile camps — the royalists on the one side and Purnananda Buragohain, the Prime Minister, and his supporters on the other. Unable to dominate the Buragohain Chandrakanta sent a messenger to Burma and succeeded in inducing the Burmese monarch to despatch a force to Assam. In 1817 the Burmese army appeared on the scene, installed Chandrakanta in full power, and returned carrying off with them a huge indemnity including a damsel as present to the Burmese monarch. On the departure of the Burmese troops the supporters of the Prime Minister dislodged Chandrakanta and placed Purandar Singha, another scion of the royal family, on the throne. On receipt of these tidings the Burmese King despatched Ala Mingi at the head of another force to Assam. Having failed to resist the Burmese Purandar fled and took shelter in Company's territory. Chandrakanta was

1. Barpujari, op.cit., p. 7
2. Bhuyan, op.cit., p. 237
reinstated, but he found the Burmese "to be dangerous allies". He too entered into Company's territory, leaving the Burmese to complete domination of Assam.

The Burmese occupation of Assam and their warlike preparations in the eastern frontier of the British dominion alarmed the authorities of the East India Company. On the suggestions made by David Scott, the Joint Magistrate of Rangpur, Lord Amherst, the Governor-General of India, declared war against the Burmese on 5 March 1824. The war continued for about two years and ended with the defeat of the Burmese. By the treaty of Yandabo, 24 February 1826, the Burmese monarch renounced all claims upon Assam. Assam passed under the control of the East India Company.

ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Under the Ahom rule in Assam the subjects and the soil were alike the property of the king. The revenue of the state was chiefly derived from personal labour or articles of produce, and only a part of it was obtained from land. All male population of the kingdom, excepting the slaves, men of rank and priests, between the age of fifteen and fifty, were

1. Ibid., p. 288
required to serve the state both for public service and for
domestic use. They were known as *pykes* and were divided
into units or *gots* consisting of four, and later three
individuals — the *mul* (first), the *dewal* (second) and the
*tewal* (third).¹ Each member of the *got* had to serve the
state for one-third or one-fourth of the year or to supply
a required quota of produce in lieu thereof.² While a *pyke*
was on duty the other members of his *got* looked after his
cultivation and other needs of his family. *Pykes* engaged
in one profession or performing one kind of service were
further grouped into *khels* or guilds, each taking its name
from the nature of the service it performed. *Pykes* engaged
in boat building, for instance, were constituted into *Noe-
salia khel*; the gun powder maker into *khargaria khel* etc.
Important and large *khels* were placed under officers of rank
viz. *Phukans* who commended six thousand *pykes*; but less
important ones were under *Baruas* and *Rajkhowas* who held
charge of two to three thousand *pykes*.³ According to the
number of *pykes* each *khel* was organised into numerical units
of twenty, hundred and thousand, commended by *Boras*, *Saikias*
and *Hazarikas* respectively. The numerical strength of a

¹ Report on the Judicial and Revenue Administration in Assam,
Shillong, 1835; Matthie to Jenkins, 15 February

² Jenkins, F., Report on the Revenue Administration of Assam,
1849-50, para 8

³ Bhuyan, *op.cit.*, p. 10
khel varied widely and ranged from a few hundred to several thousand pykes. Ordinarily, members of a particular khel were settled in a well defined locality and were assigned lands in the same area.

Each pyke was entitled to two puras of rupit or best quality paddy land called gamati or body land free of charge. In addition, he was allowed to hold a piece of land for his homestead and garden. Under the original system neither of the land was either heritable or transferable; the pykes held their gamati so long as they rendered service to the state. After the death or desertion of the pyke the land was reverted to the king who disposed it according to his pleasure. But in case the heir of the deceased pyke had not obtained his gamati elsewhere it was seldom alienated.¹ Towards the latter part of the Ahom rule the pykes were granted a sort of hereditary right over their homestead and garden land only. Scholars, however, are not unanimous in their opinions whether the pykes had transferable right by sale, gift or bequest over this category of land.

The state officials were maintained by the assignment of a number of pykes along with rent-free land known

¹ Report on the Judicial and Revenue Administration in Assam, Shillong, 1835; Matthie to Jenkins, 15 February
as nankar and manmati. The nankar lands were considered hereditary, but manmati was held during the tenure of office only. They were also allowed to take up jungle land which they cultivated with the help of their slaves. These estates, called khats, were considered hereditary and paid no rent. Following the practice of the previous government the Ahom rulers granted considerable areas of cultivable land rent-free to numerous temples, religious institutions and individuals in perpetuity.

The revenue system of Kamrup was considerably different from that of the rest of the province. The Mughals adopted therein the same revenue system as prevalent in Bengal. The district was divided into a number of parganas. The administration of each pargana was placed in charge of an officer called Choudhury who collected the revenue through Talukdars, assisted by Thakurias (subordinate collectors) and Patwaris (accountant). After the annexation of Kamrup the Ahoms found it difficult to abolish the prevailing system outright. Therein the khel system was introduced partially and the earlier system was retained, and revenue continued to

1. Barpujari, op.cit., p. 24
be collected from all lands excepting those granted rent-free.

The Mughal annexation of Lower Assam, though temporary, had resulted in greater commercial contact with the neighbouring province of Bengal. The commercial intercourse coupled with the Mughal custom of realising revenue in cash forced the Ahom rulers to make collection in money as well. When a pyke failed to attend his assigned duties or to supply the required quotas of produce in lieu thereof, he paid an equivalent tax of rupees three as gadhan. Pykes remained in excess of those engaged in state service also paid a poll tax varying from rupee one and annas eight to rupees three. If he cultivated any land in excess of his gamati, he paid rupee one per pura if the land was rupit, and annas eight if it was of any other description.¹ Pykes of non-cultivating khels were also required to pay a higher amount of poll tax; thus the brass workers and gold-washers were assessed @ Rs 5, oil pressers @ Rs 3 and fishermen @ Rs 2 per head annually.² Occasionally the Ahom rulers collected extra cesses when the royal treasury was found insufficient to meet a state of emergency.

¹ Jenkins, op.cit., para 30. But William Erskine Ward says that for such land a pyke was assessed at the rate of rupee one per pura. Ward, W.E., Introduction to Assam Land Revenue Manual, Revised Edition, 1919, p. ix

² Ibid.
The acute financial crisis occasioned by the necessity of paying a huge indemnity to the Burmese and of keeping an standing army compelled ex-Raja Chandrakanta Singha to impose a new tax at the rate of rupee one upon all subjects whether liable to pay revenue or not.¹ The tax was continued by the Burmese and came to be known as kharikatana.* In Kamrup, it was assessed on each house; in Darrang, it was collected from every family or person cooking separately; and in Nowgong and Upper Assam it was levied on all individuals.² The sack of the royal treasury by the Moamarla insurgents (1787-1793), the subsides paid to the Company's troops in Assam in 1792-93, and the seizure of a large stock of gold and silver by Thomas Welsh in 1794 also compelled Purnananda Buragohain, the Prime Minister, to resort to the unusual expedient of levying barangani or an extra cess from the satras and or religious monasteries of Upper Assam.³ Over and above, a substantial amount was also annually collected by farming out the hats (markets), ghats (fisheries) and fisheries, as well as from duties levied on goods at various customs houses.

¹ Bhuyan, op.cit., p. 530
² Jenkins, F., op.cit., para 28
³ Barpujari, op.cit., p. 26

*The term was derived from the word kharika meaning "stick". During the Burmese occupation of Assam each collector was given a specified number of slender sticks each of which represented a household on the basis of which he was to collect tax. Bhuyan, op.cit., foot note, p. 530
Under the early Ahom rule evidently the demand for cash was extremely limited. It was only after the expansion of the Ahom kingdom towards the west following the expansion of the Mughals there was a growing demand for payment in money. The radical change in the revenue system and the substitution of money in lieu of personal service and produce will be unfolded in the subsequent chapters.