Chapter V

TOWARDS CONSOLIDATION

The Irrigation Hypothesis and Hydraulic Culture

The irrigation hypothesis as a process in the formation of the state, has produced mixed reactions amongst scholars. Steward, followed by Wittfogel, Barabara Price, Hunt and Hunt are the ones to advance this hypothesis. According to Steward, irrigation needed organisation, power and co-ordination of the people which contribute to the growth of the state.¹ To Wittfogel, effective management of large volumes of water made an efficient organisation indispensable. Once this organisation existed, hydraulic economy, characterised by division of labour, intensive cultivation and co-operation on a large scale and in which the state assumed managerial role, inevitably developed.² The Hunts have convincingly shown the kind of co-ordinating activity that is necessary when an area evolves an irrigation-dependent ecology. They have demonstrated the fact that whether it is a cause of statehood or not, irrigation where it is present is a major focus of political action. According to them, all water managers are political leaders. Their theory is that

² Karl A. Wittfogel, Oriental Despotism, New Haven, Yale University Press, London, Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 22. Wittfogel has shown that hydraulic economy is a managerial and genuinely political economy.
the political action is inevitable because of the vital role of irrigation which becomes an aspect of elite power.\(^3\) So also, Barbara Price says that the most common determinant factor of infrastructure stability is irrigation agriculture. The greater the capacity to harness energy, the greater is the tendency for states to develop.\(^4\) Such factors also govern the Ahom state formation processes. Therefore, we may look into some details as to how far and to what extent, the Ahom hydraulic culture played its role in the course of its evolution.

Before the arrival of the Ahoms, the local autochthonous groups carried on the rice cultivation without the plough. They used the hoe or the digging stick, land rotation for fallowing, slash and burn and seed sowing, rather than trans-plantation methods. The most commonly used variety of paddy was ahu, a short-maturing dry type, not suitable to generate


\(^4\) Barbara Price, "Pre-hispanic Irrigation Agriculture in Nuclear America", cited by Cohen & Service, n.3, p.11.
enough surplus. Irrigation agriculture was almost absent except that in some hill stream pockets, some of the Bodo-Kacharis practised it without the plough and without the techniques of transplantation. The cultivated paddy was the same ahu variety. This was the situation when the Ahoms first landed in Upper Assam. The other wet rice growing non-tribal groups having permanent settlements were not within close proximity of the first Ahom settlements.  

Now most scholars agree that the traditional culture of the Tais is closely linked with the rice growing in low land areas. If they were to settle in a major plain area, they choose the relatively safe areas in the edges of the low land where irrigation could be easily tapped by guiding mountain streams in the direction of the level areas by means of small dykes. A Tai-pattern pile house suited to the low lands with marshy conditions subject to occasional floods as it was always built on stilts. They were everywhere connected with rice growing areas and lived in a relatively hot flat lands, and always preferred an area with an environment conducive to wet rice culture. Again, the Tais were a settled agricultural people with a stratified social organisation. They used to live in the river valleys both big and

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small, used the buffalo for ploughing in relatively deep but low marshy lands.  

Based on this Tai heritage, the Ahoms, an offshoot of the Tai race, fully displayed such characteristics of a hydraulic society. They were out and out waded to the wet rice agriculture. Earlier in our theoretical discussions, we have mentioned that under given conditions of the ecology and environment, a hydraulic society moves towards the centralisation of authority. Because, irrigated wet rice culture calls for co-ordination of various functions leading to agro-managerial despotism as large scale agriculture requires efficient management in water control. The Ahoms found the wide Brahmaputra valley extremely suitable for occupational and horticultural avenues. The ecology, the climate and the soil fed by alluvial deposits of the hill streams and the rivers with regular floods caused by the regular monsoon made the land fertile enough. The salli and bora (glutinous) paddy, which were the 'energy crops' of the Ahoms, were now extensively cultivated and thus Upper Assam

even much of its settled cultivation to the Ahoms. The hydraulic economy arising out of this, produced three significant elements. It led to a specific division of labour, intensification of the agriculture and the co-ordination of the activities in practicing such wet rice culture.

The specific division of labour or for that matter the social division of labour led to the organisation of the khel-pyke system - a unique labour utilisation process. Defence and acquiring more agricultural surplus animated the early Ahom settlers. Thus the process in turn led to the intensification of agriculture. This was done with enormous use of human labour under trying and strenuous conditions prevailing at that time.

The 13th century Upper Assam was an undulating alluvial plain, full of jungles, marshes and reeds under the given conditions of a heavy rainfall. Land reclamation was the most important and arduous task. Slope and water control were the other two activities of utmost concern for wet rice agriculture. The Ahoms were past masters in such activities. Trees

Sal and glutinous paddy (sali & borna dhan) cultivation is an inalienable characteristic of the Tai peoples. Wherever the Tai live, it is significantly marked by the cultivation of these two kinds of paddy. These constituted the most important items in an Ahom family and also in the society as well. Both were life giving ‘energy crops’ for the Ahoms, to use it in sociological terms. Thus Sal (sali paddy first boiled and then dried and hucked) is an important dietary food of the Ahoms. From borna dhan, the Ahoms prepared the most favourite rice bear. Whether it is in social or homely occasions borna rice was essential for preparation of different varieties of cakes, snacks etc. in an Ahom cultural pattern.
were uprooted and jungles were cleared off. Rain water or water coming out of the hill streams could now be contained by throwing open small bunds (ali) plotwise in the cleared fields. By force or by coercion, the Ahoms utilised the vast man-power of the subjugated population. Thus three extensive khats (large wet rice fields) namely Engerua, Gachikala and Borakhowa were set up by Sukapha, just adjacent to the first permanent capital at Charaideo, which are still in existence bearing the testimony.

The process resulted in the settled and permanent wet rice cultivation of the Ahoms. In course of time, it led to the opening up of innumerable pathars or paddy fields which were placed under different khels, melis and the bilats.

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Guha observes, "Permanent settlement in the valley did not only involve the cutting down and uprooting of trees in the low lying waste lands and marshes but also levelling up of the surface. Further bunds or dykes had to be thrown up here and there, so that fields could retain rains and flood water in the right quantity, which is so necessary for sali paddy. The migrants were equal to the test, as they had not only an excellent organisation, but also plenty of superior iron implements."

10 The term pathar is intrinsically related to the life and living of the Ahoms and later the Assamese. Place names such as Silapathar, Gabharu pathar, Jerenga pathar, Changsali pathar, Chowdang pathar etc. suggest this. See also Guha, Ibid, p. 228.
of the nobility. The king was the overall owner of all lands and therefore, it remained as the communal property of the entire community. This, to an extent, explains the absence of private property, particularly in lands, at the initial stage of the Ahom state building process.

However, hydraulic culture or irrigation alone cannot lead to statehood. Dan Nghien Van says that the hydraulic technology did not require centralised organisation. Cohen and Service also say that irrigation can operate without hierarchy. The Huts have shown that while irrigation strengthens centralised authority, it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of statehood. Scholars are thus not convinced that irrigation alone can lead to statehood mainly because of its lack of monothetic value. As such, Claessen and Skalnik have concluded that though examples may not be lacking where states have born out of irrigation, but as a factor in the process of state formation, this is not enough.

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11 A Thai/Tai proverb also supports this land system: mûn an nha, na hang suong, i.e., the land is the property of the chief of the suong, the paddy field is the property of the entire suong community. See George Condaminas, ethnos, Vol.41: F-IV, 1976, p.58. The Ethnographical Museum of Sweden, Stockholm.

12 Cited by Guha, n.5, p.37.


14 Ibid.

15 Claessen & Skalnik, n.1, p.11.
It might be true in view of the fact that the process of state formation is a very complex issue. Yet, we cannot altogether dismiss some of the very logical arguments of the Hunts and Barbara Price. It is no denying the fact irrigated agriculture becomes the focus of major political actions wherever it is present. It becomes the most common determinant factor of infrastructure stability generating greater capacity for harnessing energy which in turn stimulates the state building processes. It helps the structural and functional growths on way to statehood. The Ahom's case demonstrates this fact as we shall shortly see in the dynamics of the khel-pyke systems which sustained the entire state structure and playing a major role in the formation of the Ahom state.

The pyke system: Its origins and development

For a better appreciation of the growth of the Ahom state structure it is necessary to look into the evolution of the pyke system. Unfortunately, neither in the extant chronicles handed down to us, nor in the accounts of the historians or writers till date, we can trace any light with regard to its origins and development. Say for example, the word pyke does not find its place in the early accounts narrated in the chronicles, nor in the Ahom Lexicons. How and when the same has come into use in the later accounts is not indicated at all. Whether it could be a complete Tai-
Ahom word or an Assamese word, is not easily known. Any how, the pyke system was a unique devise in the utilisation of human labour for productions and exploitations. Because it happened to be the core of the all revenue resources, the entire militia, the productive organs and the public servi-

ces on which the Ahom state was born. It is likely that its origin was rooted in the Tai heritage of Southeast Asia and the Ahoms just extended it with further elaborations in Assam. And therefore, it would be worth rewarding if we start our enquiry from its Southeast Asian roots.

We refer here to some of the works of Thai/Vietnamese scholars. One such work mentions:

The first form of exploitation practised by the ruling nobles consist in utilising the prisoners of war to cultivate the paddy fields. These paddy fields are then called tuong, 'tuong paddy fields', because they are cultivated by the prisoners who have become tuong or servants of noble houses. Another part of the prisoners of war is assigned to the works of the house of the tag in the capacity of con huon (man of the house or domestic servants).

As the number of the prisoners increased ..., the tag is found obliged to allow the cuong to establish himself separately and clear a plot of rice field for cultivation. For this fact, the cuongs are designated by a new name - the pua or pai, those who live separately (...). Afterwards the con huon are furnished with not only the prisoners of war but also every person who is not in a position to repay the debts by the condemned, by persons without shelter etc. The cuongs, pua, pai are then for the most part Thais. They are exempted from the corvee of the tuong but they are obliged to perform the agricultural work and the corvee for the aristocratic class. The latter takes as cuong the entire hamlets. These new cuongs are called nhoc. Essentially, the cuong and nhoc designate the same thing but cuong, pua and pai are ancient cuongs whereas nhoc are new cuongs (...).
outside the cuong paddy field, the aristocratic class invents other categories of paddy fields like the na bo't na ho't ban, na cam 'reserved paddy fields', in paddy fields set apart, to allocate them to the important nobles and to the members of the nobility who do not perform any official function (...)16

This then is the general picture of the evolution of the labour utilisation processes in the Thai system. From a prisoner's status, some of them became Thais, through the Thaiisation process. In course of time, they appeared as a separate class as the pua or paie. It is not unlikely that the term pyke could have been derived from the pua or paie since a similar situation is also discernible in case of the Ahoms. Moreover, the several thousand commoners who accompanied Sukapha along with their chiefs and nobles, were no other than these paie. Under new circumstances and later sophistications in Assam, it evolved itself into an inalienable pyke system of the Ahom state. Thus the origin and the root of the whole system may be traced back to its Southeast Asian origin of the Tais.

The nature of migration of this group of Tais to Assam in the thirteenth century produced new circumstances. The

16 Cam Trong and Du'u Ying, the two Vietnamese ethnologists; cited by George Condominas, n.11, pp.21-22.

17 The numbers vary according to different chronicles. But the acceptable figure appears to be nine thousand. See P. Gogoi, The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms, Guwahati, 1968, p.257.
migrants were in search of a new homeland which would have been possible only through conquests and subjugations of different groups of people. Therefore, the nine thousand paîs or commoners had to be armed which formed the militia as well as the productive forces. This double function combined into one, is the essence of the pyke system. In their new homeland of Mungunshunkham, they all came to be known as ahoms. Gradually, and in course of time, with the extension of the territory and subjugated population, free ahom commoners were classified into chaumapykes and other ordinary commoners of the rock bottom level became kanri pykes. The institutionalisation of the khel, mel systems based on the utilisation of the pyke services by the members of the ruling groups came out of this pyke syndrome, since pykes were also considered as an inalienable property of the ruling ahom aristocracy. In course of time, the number of khels ran into some nineties while melis were also extended to the princess known as konwarî melis. Thus the process as a whole, was in the interest of the ruling class.

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18 The figure has been derived from the three thousand matangs (copper cooking pots) each being sufficient for cooking food for three persons. The matang used to be carried hanging in a bamboo pole carried by two persons on shoulders perpendicularly while the third person held fire below it and thus cooking was done even while moving. The paîk militia later organised into gata, consisting of a mul, dewal and tewal, perhaps originated from this source.

As regards to the details of the organisation, function, and structure of the pyke system we would skip it over for fear of mere repetitions as the same has been profusely dealt with by eminent scholars. What we would emphasize is the importance of the pyke system as a prime factor in the formation of the Ahom state. The system suggests the inborn stratifications in the Ahom society. The apparent form of a military democracy was the natural outcome of the system since Assam was held as their joint conquest. Therefore, the Ahom state was not totally an early state but it appears to be a secondary state. What it lacked was a bounded territory and a sufficient number of population. When these were attained, the system burst into statehood, in which the pyke system continued to be backbone of the entire Ahom state structure till the end of the state. For an appreciation of the wider dimensions of the pyke system it seems now appropriate to take up the factors relating to Ahom feudalism—its nature and characteristic features.

20 See the works of Edward Gaitskell, S.K. Bhuyan & Amalendu Guha.

21 It lends support to M.R. Fried's hypothesis that in a conquest situation, stratifications occur first. See our theoretical discussions in the first chapter.
Ahom Feudalism: Asiatic mode of productions

In general, feudalism refers to the organization of society and its political system originating in Western and Central Europe during the Middle Ages. In Marxist context, in such social organization, slavery or serfdom dominates the economic system before the advent of capitalism, the evolutionary process being, slavery to feudalism to capitalism. It is also related to a political system in which the privileges of the few weaken the state structure. As per the 18th century occidental roots, it became egregious denoting political dominance of the land holding aristocracy and the exploitation of the weak by the powerful ones.

Thus feudalism in a conventional way, is mostly understood in an occidental concept. In its oriental context too, the general tendency is to look at it with an occidental eye and that is how J.P. Wade, S.K. Bhuyan and Amalendu Guha have subscribed their views on Ahom feudalism.

Feudalism in its southeast Asian context, which has got a great deal of relevancy in case of the Ahoms, is the system of economic and socio-political organisation founded upon the bonds between man and man, in which a class of specialist warriors, i.e., the nobles one subordinate to another by a

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23 Amalendu Guha, Ahom Political System ... etc., pp. 98-39.
hierarchy of bonds of dependence dominate and control a mass of peasants who cultivate the land and make them live.24 George Condominas has brought to light this very fact in his analysis of Thai feudalism. In a historical context, he has drawn a comparison between the Khmer empire with that of the Germanic barbarians who destroyed the Roman empire and says that the southeast Asian context differs a great deal from that presented by Western Europe of that time.25

Jacques Van Leer, the Dutch sociologist, has also drawn a perceptive characterization of the Southeast Asian situation which would be worth quoting in understanding the rationale of Ahom feudalism:

... mass domestication made possible by river and canal irrigation farming formed the basis for control of the population by officials of the ruler. All subjects were required to render service to the authority, and that service was organized and directed bureaucratically by an administrative apparatus. The chief role of the cities was that of being royal seats... in which levies in kind were brought together from the whole country, and royal store houses in which the levies were stocked and from which the host of officials, the army and the royal household were provided. The same system was used for lower administrative units. Large scale planned projects of agrarian colonization were undertaken and with the services of the subjects monumental building activities were accomplished. They were forced labour states, socage states or liturgical states. The legal status of the agrarian population could vary from that of free holders to that of serfs and slaves brought into the state by predatory war, purchase or subjugation and established in agrarian

25 George Condominas, n.11, p.40.
Perhaps this is just enough to show the difference between the Western and Southeast Asian situations. Besides, while treating the problems of power the essential difference between the occidental and oriental views of feudalism appears clearly. In the occidental view, the territory, its surface and its borders play an essential role while in the orientalists' view, it is the control of the labour force which matters most. Marx therefore, in the oriental context, has described it as the 'Asiatic mode of production' characterizing its lack of private ownership of land and complete subjugation of the individual peasant accounting to a basic unchangeableness of the Asian societies.

It is true that Ahom feudalism had no private property in land. There was the complete subjection of the pykes which constituted the greatest majority of the population between the two strata - the nobles, the aristocracy and the bureaucracy on the one hand, and the serfs on the other. It is also true that the pyke system accounted for the basic unchangeableness in the Ahom state because the system became so in-built that it blocked all the ways to other modes of productions leading to a diversified economy in

the state. Yet, it is difficult to attribute the concept of western feudalism including even that of Marx of its evolution from slavery to feudalism. Because slavery did not develop here as it was in Greek-Roman cases. It was not slave power but socage which provided all the necessary man power both for securing surplus, for the militia, and above all, for the construction of huge tanks, roads and ramparts, the massive temples and the eye-catching burial mounds of the Ahom monarchs. In the Asian situation, this was the general characteristic that where irrigated wet rice culture was present, the construction of huge temples and monuments took place. However, in the Ahom state, the basic unchangeableness of Marx or the apparent stagnancy in the other modes of production might have been due to the contradictions within the Ahom social system or they were at the cross road of cultural currents provided by the Hindu and Islamic culture contacts.

The evolutionary process of the pyke system witnessed at least three factors operating in it. Firstly, it was the ruling class interest, secondly, the rise of a paternal bureaucracy as a measure of reconciling the internal contradictions within the ruling class and thirdly leading to the birth of coercive authority. In the beginning, the first led
to the setting up of the appanages or Rajaships on the territorial division of labour basis at Saring, Tingkhong, Tipam, Namrup and Dihing where the royal princes were settled and from amongst whom the succession to the throne usually took place. The process began from the reign of Gahumung Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) with further extension of similar privileges to the nobility. Likewise, the offices of the frontier governors of the Sadayakhwa and the Marangikhowa Gohains also came into existence when the extensive tracts of the Chutiya and Kachari kingdoms came under Ahom territorial jurisdictions through annexations and subjugation of the divergent populations. The third member in the council of ministers, namely, the Barpatra Gohain, in addition to the already existing two ministers of Buragohain and Borgohain, was created. One of them was made Rajmantri, who was one amongst equals with similar privileges except that he was allotted one thousand men/pykes and that he goes first amongst the three ministers. 27

Initially, all the free Ahom commoners were under direct control of the king. By the end of the 13th century, a new arrangement was made with two separate divisions one each under the Buragohain and the Borgohain, 28 who now commanded

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28 This took place during the reign of Subinphas (1281-1293). See Gait, History of Assam, LAS publications, Guwahati, 1962, p. 80; Borzorgohai Aoms Borhuli, PHAS, Guwahati, 1962, p. 103.
the free Ahom commoners while the king retained the non-Ahom commoners. When the office of the Barpatragohain was created, the non-Ahom subjects were allotted to him since both the Burugohain and the Bargohain refused to part with their Ahom subjects to the new minister. 29

So far the free Ahom commoners were yet to be subjected to coercion. Public opinion and not any coercive authority was the general rule. But with the expansion of the territory and population and the increasing wars, the need of more surplus productions to maintain the pace of growing ruling class interest, the situation could not remain as the same. A new arrangement, a rationalisation and all ramifications of the pyke system became imperative which led to the birth of coercive authority. By the end of the reign of Guklemung Garganya Raja (1539-1552), the pykes were organised into gote of four adult males who were to render compulsory service to the state for one year in turn by each in return for an approximately 2.66 acres of wet rice land on usufruct basis. 30 The ramifications of the pyke system resulted in the organisation of the khel mel units based on functional, professional and sometimes even on territorial orders, placed each under lineage based kingroup heads. The

29 Amalendu Guha, n. 23, p. 29.
entire state structure now rested on the utilisation of man
power in the interest of the ruling class *vía*-*vía* the
state. The increasing workload of the state led to the crea-
tions of the new offices of the Barbarua and the Barphukan,
the pyke militia was reformed during the reign of Saukenpha
Pratap Singha (1603-1641) where the ruling class interest mani-
fiest in the extension of the bureaucracy in the civil and
military officials like the Meoge, Rajkhawas, Hazarikas, Sakti-
kas and the Borsa, all at the cost of the pyke labour. 31

From the foregoing analysis, this much we can say that
the Ahom feudalism was not feudalism in essence or in the
sense of the term. The local variants are widely diffused
here. The specifics arise here because of the agro-hydraulic
class of the Ahom society. The system suggests more of an
agro-managerial despotism:

*Agro-managerial despotism is essential to hydraulic
society, and as far as we know it is specific to it.
It is specific in that in agro-hydraulic civilisa-
tions, different from feudalism, corvée labour is
imposed on the mass of the population by the state. 32*

What is 'corvée labour' in the west, is just the pyke
system in the Ahom's case. The pyke system with all its ram-
ications in its 'khela', 'mela', 'gote', 'kanri pykas' and
'chamua pykes' and others was ossified into the ongrowing
Ahom polity leading to the growth of a hierarchical struc-
ture, pyramydic in form, with the increase in subjugated

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31 For details on the organisational aspects, see P. Gogoi, n. 27, p. 551; Gait, n. 28, p. 239.
people and increase in more cultivable lands, with the compelling necessity of maintaining both defence-offence and productive surpluses for the exploitation of a privileged few as well, and thereby institutionalising the unequal access to the resources, the pyke system became the backbone of the whole Ahom structural growth, which in turn gave birth to a highly stratified Ahom society. The pyke system was the impeccable factor in the growth, consolidation and sustenance of the Ahom state so much so that when the system crumbled, the whole state edifice collapsed.

Social Stratifications

In simple words, social stratification means the layers of society which are formed out of differences in occupation, income, prestige and style of life acquiring rewards and privileges. As a sociological concept, it refers to higher and lower differential strata of both individuals and groups in human society with certain general characteristics. Thus power, occupational prestige, property and wealth, religious and ritual purity, family and ethnic group positions, local community status and co-relations among rankings are some of the dimensions involved in the studies of social stratifications.

The approach to the studies in social stratification varies. To Marx, it is dichotomic relating to the social classes of the rulers and the ruled; the exploiters and the exploited. To this, Weber added status as a generalised social
phenomenon relating to all positions in the occupational structure of the society. Others who have theorised on the stratification studies are Talcott Parsons, Kingsley Davis, and Wilbert E. Moore. They have put more emphasis on prestige dimensional issues including that of status and power.  

In any case, social stratification studies need to be multi-dimensional. It also needs to be free of ideological bias and calls for a measuring devise for each of its differential dimensions. Herein, each individual or group in society is conceived of as ranked along each of the several dimensions of social stratification, but the status inconsistency element poses problem in co-relating the dimensional factors particularly in the sphere of combining high occupational group and low ethnic position or vice versa.  

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34 Similar studies have been made by Romila Thapar with regard to the 'ritual status' and 'actual status' in the Varna dimensional contexts of the Indo-Gangetic valley where Brahmanical influence predominates. See Romila Thapar, From Lineage to State, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 14. Atala Guha, Neo-Vaishnavism to Insurgency: ..., etc., Occasional Paper No. 57, CSSS, Calcutta, 1984, p. 7. Has also made similar observations about the low ranking status of the Ahoms as the new Hindu peasant caste, and of tribal neophytes being admitted to the lowest rung of the caste ladder etc. The caste element seems to have been in the Ahom society too. The king Shukapha, on his way of migration, took with him all the Lukta Ahoms and made them Kukurachowas. The Ahoms of good origin would not allow the Kukurachowas to dine with them. See Ahom Suranil, Ed., G.C. Barua, ..., p. 36.
Therefore, it is very difficult to speak of a general rule or a method by which the social stratification studies could be made. Because we know that both functionally and structurally, stratifications refer to the entire complex of hierarchical differentiations, whether group related or not. Neither Marxist nor Weberian propositions could lead us to a correct perspective of the stratification issues in its entirety. Even the thesis of Parsons, Davis and Moore also falls short of in as much as it undermines the conflict theory and the power dimensional issues. Therefore, in the A horns case, we propose to follow an open way.

All scholars now generally agree to the fact that the real stratifying factor, in a given society, is the unequal access to the basic means of productions. Therefore, the existence of classes is a distinctive feature of all states. In the process of evolution it marks two stages of development with considerable time gap between the two. Firstly, the stratification is marked by the unequal access to the basic resources amongst members of the same sex and equivalent age status 35 and secondly, coercive means are organised and co-ordinated as an apparatus for the maintenance of exploitative relations of production between a class of

labourers and a class of non-labourers. 36 Plato, in the Republic, and later Morgan and Engels drawing on similar lines, have shown that the family is the key support of inequality, that is, of social stratification. It is being argued that individuals are motivated to secure for other family members, for whom they feel affection, any privileges that they themselves have. Hence in every society, there is a built-in pressure to institutionalise inequality by making it hereditary.

Morgan has shown that a social organisation founded upon gentes, phratries, and tribes, in course of time, led to the birth of a political organisation founded upon territory and upon property. 37 To which, emphasizing the economic content, Engels adds:

The old society based on sex groups bursts asunder in the collision of the newly-developed social classes; in its place a new society appears, constituted in a state, the lower units of which are no longer sex groups, a society in which the family system is entirely dominated by the property system, and in which the class antagonisms and class struggles, which make up the content of all hitherto written history, now freely develop. 38

J.B. Bhattacharjee has brought out the significance of the social stratification issue as the crucial factor in the process of state formation. It would be worth quoting him in the context of Ahom state formation process:

... it is by now almost universally held that the transition from the primitive/tribal organization to the state was the result of social stratification and that the state formation process commenced almost simultaneously with the beginning of stratification in the given society. The tribal societies began to change towards this direction with the beginning of privatization of resources when the societies became segmented into various interest groups or classes (in a limited sense) on the basis of differentiated land/resource holdings and social and political role of the individuals. The position of these individuals determined the status of their respective clans. In course of time no two clans could be treated as equals in the society in terms of prestige, role and privileges thereby accomplishing the stratification and bringing the state into existence. After all, inequality is the hallmark of the state.

Inequality was the hallmark of the Ahom state too. The unequal access to resources were maintained by the Ahom state strictly up to the end of the state. From marginal stratification in the early Ahom society to a built-in form of stratification through the Pyke system was the process which sustained the Ahom state structure all throughout. As we shall shortly see, the available data on the Ahoms suggest this.

The Ahoms were by all means at an egalitarian but advanced tribal stage or in the 'Upper stage of Barbarianism' to use the terminology of Engels. They had an advanced culture using the iron sword, the iron ploughshare and the axe which were important for field agriculture on a large scale and clearing of extensive forests for the purpose of cultivation. Above all, they were literate too. Thus their stage of civilisation was marked by their knowledge of animal domestication and land cultivation. They also knew the methods of increasing the productivity of nature through organised human activity.

Sukapha, the leader of the Tai-Ahom group, was accompanied, in addition to the chiefs and nobles, by some nine thousand pykes. They constituted the third section of the migrating Ahom populace. Thus the Ahom gentes, phratries and in totality the tribe itself suggest the stratification to a certain degree even before Assam became their joint conquest. The three-tier Ahom social organisation was in its embryonic form and burst asunder when they started settling permanently in the Brahmaputra valley in Upper Assam and when more conquests, expansion of territories and absorption of conquered societies for exploitation of their labour force in extending their wet rice culture took place. In course of

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\(^{40}\) F. Engels, a. 38, pp. 27-29, see for his analysis of the stages to civilisation.
time, with the growth of 'economic surpluses' giving birth to a ruling class interest group, the exploiters and the exploited groups emerged.

To the Ahom wet rice agriculturists, under the given conditions of ecology of upper Assam, the land reclamation was the first task. The task was by no means easy. Each forested marshy land tracts had to be cleared up plot by plot, necessitating the use of enormous forced labour. This was simply not possible to do on individual basis and hence, large scale social organisation on whole community basis had to be set up. This resulted in cementing the labour utilisation process through the Pyke system which in turn, led to the birth of an agri-based society providing the basic foundations of the Ahom polity, economy and society. Thus a logical sequence arises in the social stratification in the Ahom state.

Upto the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Ahom society had limited stratification all in terms of power, prestige and status. Later on, when mostly through conquests, there was territorial and demographic expansions simultaneously, exploitations also increased and private property appeared in a diffused manner. Upto this time, the Ahom society still had small dimensions both territorially and
and demographically. The *pyke* labour force was confined more or less within the Ahom populace. The Morans and the Borahis, whom the Ahoms subjugated first, were juxtaposed to one another without particular differentiation. The character of the society appeared as segmental as no difference was noticeable in the new sub-units that were gradually absorbed in the *pyke* system. Further defence and subsistence were the main concern for all and productions continued to be the primary social activity and the emerging social stratifications had very little impact.

But the situation could not remain the same. Coercion now became necessary for the state which resulted in the rationalisation of the *pyke* system by 1611 by making it a compulsory state service. This was further cemented in the reforms of the *pyke* militia by 1653. The traditional Ahom society was being replaced by a new Assamese society which was predominantly agrarian-based as the whole mass of the population was put into the same basket of the *pyke* system. On each stage of the elaboration of the *pyke* system, new offices came into existence and the feudalistic elements appeared prominently. Extension of the bureaucracy and the hierarchical differences with status and power went on side by side. The bureaucracy was monopolised by *Satgharia* (seven
lineage based clans) families. From paternal bureaucracy, it landed into monopoly bureaucracy. Thus a change in the formal social structure was the natural outcome. We can agree here with Leach that in a particular locality over a period of time a political system composed of equititarian lineage segments is replaced by a ranked hierarchy of feudal type bringing about a change in the formal social structure.  

A degree of social mobility is discernible in the upper stratum. The lineage groups rose from seven to some fifteen. The high offices were exclusively filled up from this group. There are instances sometimes and occasionally at times and at the command of the sovereign, man from lower stratum were also elevated to the high offices. Momi Tamuli Barbarua, Kirti Chandra Barbarua and Satram Saringia Phukan are some of the historical figures which could be mentioned as examples. However, this sort of social mobility was rare and limited and at least it cannot be generalised.

This is how the Ahom society came to be highly stratified. The ruling group, represented by the Konwar melas, Kunwar melas, the five Patra Mantris, along with the Phukans, Baruas, Neogs, Rajkhowas, down to the Hazarikas, Saikias, and Boras on the one hand, and at the bottom of the social ladder the

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42 Amalendu Guha, n.5, p. 20.
Kanri pykes on the other marked the social stratifications pyramidal in form.

The growth of money economy and commodity production were very slow in medieval Assam. The state revenue came mostly from the exploited labour force of the pykes. In war and peace, in maintaining the royalty, the nobility, the various Satras and temple establishments, and in executing public works—all these that is to say the entire state burden rested on the exploited labour force of the pykes. The status and power of the nobility both spiritual and temporal was also determined by number of pykes allotted to them.

Below the kanri pykes, we find the class of bandi-beti, logua-likchow, bahatia class which can be unmistakably classed as slaves. Above the kanri pykes, there was another class within the pyke system known as the Chamus. They were the relatives of the Ahom aristocracy and their position was somewhat different from that of the kanri pykes. They had not to perform compulsory service. Their way to social ladder was

43 Neog notes, there were privileged persons, who were free from the burden of taxes and revenue. He lists some twenty kinds of taxes in the Ahom government. See for the details of the revenue and taxation, Maheswar Neog, Socio-Political Events in Assam Leading to the Militancy of the Naga-Maria Vaisnavas, CSSS, K.P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta, 1992, pp. 20-23.

44 The details of ritual decency and decorum as per the status of the nobles have been recorded in several chronicles. See also Kashi Nath Tamuli phukan, Assam Buranj Sar, ed., P.C. Choudhury, DHAS, Guwahati, pp. 63-84.
opened and when promoted to higher offices, they were out of the pyke system and were known as apaikon chamuas. They appeared as the middle order class of cultivators, in the social system of the time. In addition to this, we find bhumidan pykes who were permanently assigned to the Satras and 'temple establishments' along with lands granted and also to some nobles for their outstanding achievements. This class was slightly better than that of the kanri pykes.

These lower strata, entangled in one single organisation of the pyke system constituted the great majority of the population. Land was allotted to them on usufruct basis. The system became so in-built that it left no way for the growth of a diversified economy. This is what Marx described as 'the Asiatic mode of production' with the visible feudalistic elements.

The Ahoms followed their traditional and conventional values dogmatically. When Manthir Bharali Barua, a kayastha, was appointed by the king to decide the punishments to the Ahom officers, it was strongly objected by the non-co-operation of the Ahom officers in the battle against Mirjula, which is ascribed as one of the reasons of Ahom defeat. Again, one Kalita Phukan, also a kayastha, was wielding much influence.
and power under the behest of the king Lakshmi Singh (1769-1780), the king was warned again and again by the nobility.

Likewise, the Ahoms (both rulers and the commoners) and non-Ahoms who were Hinduized, were not admitted into the fold of Upper caste Hindu class. Despite of linguistic assimilation and identical socio-economic levels, commensality and connubium differences remained watertight between the two groups. This was a significant dimension arising out of the impact of the Brahmanical influence\(^45\) in relation to the Vaishnavite movement culminating in the Hinduization process of the non-Hindu population.

Thus in the stratifications, religious and cultural dimensions, apart from the economical ones, are perceptible to a considerable degree. Though totally not acceptable, the religious dimensions in such stratifications was the spark to ignite the Mokamoria rebellion. All these data suggest the operation of the ethnic and prestige dimensional variables of the stratification issues in as much as it was in an organic pattern, the relationship was not between equals but between members of the hierarchically organized units.

\(^{45}\) See Chapter VII.
It is indeed a problem for all students of stratification to co-relate the dimensional factors and co-ordinate the different variables in drawing up an accurate account of the stratification issues. However, the Assam's case, leaves enough room to believe that to hold together the internal contradictions arising out of stratification issues, the state was necessary.