Chapter 8
CONCLUSION

The eighteenth century social formation in Assam represented not only a continuation of the system which was initiated with the beginning of Ahom rule but was also partly a result of the evolution that had been going on prior to the advent of the Ahoms in the thirteenth century. But what we witness during the eighteenth century was a developed and mature version of this socio-economic evolution.

By the eighteenth century Assam under its ruling class the Ahoms was a compact political entity encompassing the largest geographical area in its historical period and within it a heterogeneous composition of diverse ethnic groups. Being blessed by a favourable physiography and climatic conditions, the fertile river valley of the Brahmaputra provided excellent conditions for the emergence of a prosperous rice economy. The Ahom conquest of the Brahmaputra valley had represented an improvement in the productive forces. As advanced wet-rice cultivating group, with the knowledge of the use of animal drawn ploughs, the Ahoms were successful in bringing the disparate tribal groups who still cultivated through slash and burn, using mainly the hoes, within their mode of production. The resultant increase in productivity enabled to sustain a larger population and a rising state appariti which helped to carry out the dominant functions of the state namely security, appropriation and distribution of the surplus. The control over the distribution of land and labour enabled the state to intervene actively in the production process. The requirements of the wet-
rice economy such as of reclamation of lands through cutting down of thick monsoon forests, soil leveling and construction of river embankments for flood protection were carried out under the initiative and supervision of the Ahom state. Indirectly, these functions enabled the state to acquire legitimacy in the eyes of its subjects.

Land, the dominant mean of production in an agrarian economy, theoretically belonged to the state, who also undertook its distribution but not on any equitable basis. In the prevailing context of land abundance and scarcity of labour, the Ahom state was heavily dependent on the labour services of its subjects - the kanri paiks. Hence, in Assam not only the land but the subjects were also considered the property of the state. Appropriation thus took the form of compulsory periodic labour services to the state. The state therefore, not only gave in kind but also received mostly in kind and services. The surplus thus went in for direct consumption by the ruling class. At the peasant micro-economy, most of the consumption needs of the peasant and his family, who possessed their own means of subsistence, were satisfied within the household itself. Handicrafts constituted a secondary occupation of the peasant and his family.

With hired labour for production virtually impossible and land abundant, the volume of agricultural and non-agricultural production was totally dependent on supplies of labour. Hence, the state also imposed curbs on the size of peasants holding of wet rice lands. With outputs limited by the supply of labour and
with peasants output circumscribed by state restrictions and forced labour services, by the eighteenth century the economic system was characterised by stagnating productivity.

Although there is disagreement among scholars over the relative freedom the peasants enjoyed, the fact is that the peasants were under bondage to render compulsory periodic labour services to the state. The likchoos were reported to be under worse situation than the slaves. It must be pointed out that though slavery was prevalent in Assam and in the context of labour shortages slaves were used for productive purposes by the higher classes/castes, however appropriation by the state did not take the form of slave labour. The restricted amount of wet rice lands and the burden of state service made it difficult for the peasants to go for any extensive surplus production. Production was thus mainly for immediate consumption. Items like pepper, stick lac and silk etc., were produced by the peasants to satisfy the exchange needs of the state. The marketing network that developed was largely to satisfy the exchange needs of scarce goods. Villages were thus more or less self-sufficient economic units with their artisan and craftsmen needs satisfied within the unit. In other words, there was a unity between agriculture and craftsmanship brought about by the division of labour which was not yet strict.

The mode and extent of appropriation by the Ahom state in the form of forced labour therefore, not only determined the level of production and the development of a marketing network it also eventually determined the level of trade and commercial activity.
within and outside the region. Because of the limitations imposed by the mode of appropriation, the range of trading activities at various levels was also limited. Within the peasant micro-economy most of the demand for crafts and artisan services were satisfied within the household itself. With a self-subsistence economy and a division of labour in the form of occupational castes still in the process of emergence, the marketing network and trade that developed were essentially rudimentary in nature. Private trade was also not encouraged by the Ahom state who exercised an overall control over trading activities through its agents and officials. The major trade ventures with outside states were regulated and controlled by the state itself.

As wet rice cultivators requiring collective efforts at cultivation, the economic needs provided the rationale for a political organisation of the Mung type as far as the Tai Ahoms were concerned. Economic appropriation and distribution being the dominant activities of the state, the political structure was responsible for the smooth functioning of the economy and largely dependent on its successful organisation. Owing to his successful role in the organisation of production and distribution of surplus, kingship had acquired despotic powers. The Hinduisation of the polity added to the sanctity and ideological indispensability of his role. But in the effort to legitimise itself, the extension of patronage to religious functionaries and institutions in the form of land grants and paiks resulted in contradiction within the power structure. The
resulting feudalisation of the political structure was also manifest in the creation of numerous vassal states linked to the Ahom state by ties of patronage and political dependence.

The Hinduisation process after the sixteenth century introduced a further hierarchical element in the class based social structure. The Brahmins came to occupy a very high status position. The Ahom aristocracy along with the high state officials because of their political status and power enjoyed a position of prestige. But as new converts to Hinduism the Ahoms in general were relegated to occupying a low status position as sudras. However, the spread and consolidation of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement with its call for egalitarianism brought in a certain flexibility in the social order. While on the one hand, the Vaishnavite ideology posed as a challenge to the existing caste ideology, on the other hand the emergence of a new class of spiritual lords or Gossains resulted in undermining the social pre-eminence of the royalty.

An integral aspect of Ahom social formation was the perpetuation of the ideology of kingship. The king was not only seen as the guarantor of welfare and protector of his subjects but also as the guarantor of fertility and higher returns of land. Since the king was above his people he also had great responsibilities towards his subjects. These were, security, distribution and redistribution of land resources, irrigation and to ensure the economic prosperity of the community. The kingship ideology was reinforced by the sanction of the priestly class. Perpetuated by the monarchy and supported by the priestly class this ideology
came to have an hegemonic effect on the people. The ruling class also found it politically expedient to give sanction to the caste ideology to reinforce its own claim to rule and monopolise the high offices of the state. The high castes were confirmed and consolidated in their privileged position by generous grants of land and high positions. However, the emergence and consolidation of the Neo-Vaishnavite faith posed as an alternative and stronger ideology to the existing concept of kingship and caste ideology. Specially, the concept of 'Swargadeo' or the king as god was given a jolt by the Vaishnavite ideology of considering the guru as being only next to god. The resultant effect of the weakening of the old ideology was to weaken the basis of the monarchy and in general the economic and political foundations.

A major contradiction that had emerged during the eighteenth century was the low level of surplus. Whereas the state political hierarchy and administrative structure continued to grow, the basis of surplus continued to remain narrow. The nature of the dominant mode of appropriation in the form of services had a restrictive influence. The withdrawal of a large number of paiks - source of potential surplus to religious functionaries and large scale evasion of paik duties by peasants cut at the very basis of the economy. The remaining paiks were subjected to intense exploitation. Hence during the latter part of the eighteenth century attempts were made to break free of the state service by commutation and going for Chamua status. But the state could grant Chamua status up to a particular point and no more. The paik system however, had enough loopholes for those
wanting to escape the forced labour. Large scale evasion of paik duties which had become fairly widespread during the second half of the eighteenth century represented a structural crisis in the prevailing situation which manifested itself in the form of the Moamaria rebellion.

For the successful perpetuation of the social formation what was essential was a large base of labour manpower in a natural economy, a small ruling class attached to the Ahom crown by ties of loyalty and a strong ideology of kingship. The latter meant the success of the Ahom king in providing security, and success in the appropriation and distribution of the surplus. However, the state curbs on the growth of landed property and withdrawal of paik labour was not possible during the eighteenth century. The political expediency of aligning the priestly class on its side resulted in the growth and development of the satra institutions which emerged as strong contenders to challenge the state's interest in respect of the surplus and prestige.

Owing to the nature of the system secular landlordism in Assam failed to emerge. Since the power of the nobility depended on their offices and their estates were resumable by the state, their growth could be watched and checked by the state. The growth of landed estates visible in the development of the religious institutions notably that of the satras, was sought to be suppressed as well as patronized by the Ahom state at different times. But eventually the growth and consolidation of the satras as landed proprietors and alongside the emergence of the gossains as a new class of spiritual lords whose influence
extended beyond their domain cutting across geographical and caste barriers, could not be prevented by the state. The paiks assigned to the satras, in course of time came to constitute a body of tenantry with hereditary occupancy rights. The grant of satra lands to its disciples on favourable terms was also gradually leading to a new land relationship and private ownership within satra lands. The parallel economy witnessed here represented a progressive development of the relations of production.

But the stumbling block in the further development of the forces and production relations was the Ahom state itself. As was seen, the state intervened actively in the production process - from mobilising labour for land reclamation etc. to supplying scarce consumption items to its subjects. This was aimed at perpetuating the system by preventing the growth of any developments detrimental to the perpetuation of the system. In fact the Ahom kings based on the concept of divine kingship, concentrated theoretically all the powers of the state unto themselves.

The existing regime then prevented the growth of powerful social classes. Whenever the state perceived any signs of such emergence, it tried to curb it. In other words, by checking such manifestations of the development of productive forces and production relations in the social structure (emergence of powerful social classes) the state tried to restrict the growth and further advancement of feudalism. In trying to maintain its status quo it gradually lost its vitality without being able to
curb the growth of the progressive forces. Taking advantage of the crisis the nobles and spiritual lords strengthened themselves and peasants either commuted or evaded their labour services to the state. The Vaishnavite satras not only attracted more and more Ahom subjects it also became a refuge for discontented paiks. The Vaishnavite ideology also cut at the Ahom ideology of kingship and provided an alternative to the people, who so far had only the state patronized religious ideology available. In fact, the Moamaria rebellion resulted apparently from a clash between the religious practices of the sakta kings and its Vaishnavite subjects although it was a manifestation of other rising inner contradictions of the structure.

In the ultimate analysis the eighteenth century social formation of Assam represented the peak of 'Ahom feudalism' although by European as well as Indian parameters it still remained as Amalendu Guha called it 'quasi-feudal'. It was by and large a type of its own - in a category by itself. The Ahoms had occupied Assam when it was still by and large tribal. In the subsequent centuries the tribal mode advanced but not to the extent where it could become overwhelmingly feudal. Therefore, it is not very surprising that some features which are characteristic of the controversial Marxian concept of Asiatic Mode of production were traceable in Assam. After all A.M.P. is only an advance stage of the tribal mode in transition to feudalism (A.M.P. is not an Asian variety of European feudalism as sometimes believed). Therefore, although feudalism in Assam was gradually maturing, with its features becoming strongly manifest, the Ahom state's
persistence in checking its further development held back some traces of tribalism from disappearing altogether. This structural dilemma gave rise to the crisis which ultimately brought about the collapse of the system.