The prevailing socio-economic condition in the vassal kingdoms was almost everywhere the same. The society was more or less organised on the basis of clans and tribes. Four classes of people appeared to have constituted the entire society. The tribal chiefs, their subordinate officers and the priests—both Brahminical and non-Brahminical—constituted the upper class. The peasantry of various tribes formed the next higher class. The petty traders and artisans formed another class and below them there was the slaves and bondsmen, in varied degree in almost all the vassal kingdoms.

Professor Neog refers to the existence of a middle class in the contemporary Koch kingdom. He identifies the middle class consisting of several functionaries such as petty shopkeepers, government servants, sepoys, peons or messengers, dhopharas, garmalis, storekeepers, mahaliya, sadagar, dancers, musicians, etc. As in the koch kingdom, the same kind of functionaries had been there in almost every vassal kingdoms during the period of our study.

The upper strata of the tribal society had under them a group of servitors such as lagowa and licksow and cultivators. They lived by the labours of these people.

The society was based mainly on patriarchal principle, but certain tribes like the Jaintias and Garos, had been matriarchal. The matriarchal families were not numerous.
The population of the vassal kingdoms was of mixed nature. The chief of the vassal kingdom normally came from the dominating clan of a certain tribe. The people of different tribes lived in these kingdoms. Primarily the Tiwa (Lalung), the Mikir (Karbi), the Garos, the Kacharis, the Koches, the Ahoms, the Hindus belonging to different castes, the Muslims, the Boros, the Khasis formed the population of the tribal kingdoms brought under the tutelage of the Ahoms. Besides the Brahmins forming the priestly class, there were separate priestly class hailing from some of the tribes too. For instance, the priestly class amongst the Tiwa (Lalung) tribe was called ‘Deuri’. “There was no authorised priestly caste among the Kacharis….”²

People lived a clan life having allegiance to their tribe and the tribal chief. Their social life was regulated by tribal customs that come down traditionally from times immemorial. They showed respect to their ‘totem’. For example, the royal families of Baghara and that of Kumoi did not eat ari fish as they claimed it as their ‘totem’. The royal family of Baghara also skipped one meal in the event of the killing of a tiger. The royal families of Gobha, Neli, Khola, Sahari and Damal also did not eat mali fish in consideration of it being their ‘totem’. In addition to mali fish the royal family of Damal also regarded pigeon as their ‘totem’.

Social class division was in a rudimentary form there being no rigid division of labour. The same people cultivated the land as agriculturists and went to the battle-field as soldiers. They produced everything necessary for their household consumption, ranging from food articles to agricultural implements and domestic furniture. The needs and requirements of an agricultural population were few and as everything was produced indigenously/localy with their own little labour and in proportion to the demand, there was no surplus production. There
had been an Assamese adage, "আকালো নাই, তবীলো নাই." In the Assamese society of the medieval period 'there has been no wants and no surplus', i.e., the Assamese people had a subsistence economy. It was village or natural economy. It remained confined or limited within the jurisdiction of the village.

The society was an agricultural society producing its food articles and other necessaries with the help of rudimentary implements. Land formed the core element in the agricultural economy. During the period of our study, land belonged to the clan/tribe, and the chief/king of the tribe distributed it among the cultivators as the leader of the clan or tribe. Kalita writes, "Under the Ahoms, initially, lands belonged to the community. The Ahoms had long been in a semi-tribal semi-feudal socio-economic stage of development, and since after their arrival in Assam in the early 13th century A.D. they were in the midst of indigenous semi-tribal socio-economic ethnic groups, the latter always preferred the method of shifting to settled cultivation for which they were looked down upon by the emigrating Ahoms as Kha-people (slave or culturally inferior foreigner). The concept of private property in land did not arise in the then condition of land abundance and prevalent practice of shifting or 'unsettled cultivation with a meagre population. The Ahoms, habituated to their clan life and community living, did not feel it necessary to introduce private property rights over the lands either.³

The people enjoyed the right of private property on land used for homestead and bari and basti, i.e., homestead, bari and basti lands were hereditary with a permanent occupancy right. In the Ahom kingdom, land was treated as the property of the community in absolute terms, with partial recognition of the right of private ownership over the homestead and garden lands.⁴ Again the land belonging to the Brahmins and temples under grants
issued by the king also became hereditary. The same land system prevailed in the vassal kingdoms too.

This practice had been prevalent in the various tribal domains even before the coming of the Ahoms and the latter followed it with certain degree of innovation. The vassal kings continued the system in their respective kingdoms.

**Agriculture and Horticulture**

Agriculture formed the mainstay of the tribal economy. Rice was the primary article of food. It was extensively cultivated. Because of the topographical nature of their original habitat the people of the vassal kingdoms resorted to jhum cultivation. According to P.C. Choudhury, "Cultivation was carried on in the beginning by a crude method of 'jhuming', i.e., by cutting down jungles and trees, setting fire to them, making holes in the land with the help of digging sticks and then sowing seeds without the use of the hoe or plough. Even now among most tribes this is the main method employed in cultivation, believed to have been introduced at a very early time."⁵

Subsequently with the growth of population, they started to raise paddy in the foot-hills to meet the increasing demand. In so doing they regulated the flow of water from the hilly fountain down through a kind of channel to the plains. These channels were called 'Dongs' by the tribes.

Paddy was raised in two different times of the year, ahu rice in the dry season and wet-rice in the rainy season. The seeds of the ahu rice were sown broadcast in the fields prepared beforehand while it was completely dry. The wet-rice cultivation was done while the monsoon had begun and the fields were full with water. The wet-rice (sali rice) cultivation has been the practice of transplantation of paddy seedlings. The seedlings were grown in a nearby plot of land and after a certain period of time these were uprooted and transplanted in
the fields. Apart from ahu and wet-rice the people also produced bau rice. It has been raised in the soil submerged by deep water.

That rice was abundantly produced in Assam including the vassal kingdoms under the Ahoms was testified by Gait when he said that Mir Jumla during his occupation of Garhgaon had found “170 storehouses, each containing from one to ten thousand mounds of rice.”

Apart from rice the people cultivated mustard, different kinds of pulses, vegetables, oil seeds of various kinds, sugarcane, garlic, potato of various kinds such as mowa alo, kath alo, etc.

They also produced large quantities of orange, garcinia (thekera), wood-apple (bel), various kinds citrus fruits like lemon, shaddock (rubab tenga), outenga (dillenia indica), amara (spondiasamara), panial and kardai (averrhoa carambola). Various kinds of pumpkins (komora, ranga lau, jati lau), guava, papaya, pine-apple, jack-fruit, cocoanut, areca nut, betel leaves, bananas of different kinds, mango, pepper, long-pepper, tez pat (malaborthrum), promoganate, ginger, turmeric, silikha, amlakhi and bhumora. Ginger and turmeric formed the main articles of trade.

The areas where pepper (jaluk in Assamese) was produced in abundance came to be known as Jaluguti (in Dandua) and Jalukbari (in Rani Rajya). Again where ginger was produced in abundance came to be known as Adabari (in Rani Rajya). Jalukbari and Adabari are adjacent to each other and they are now within Guwahati in the Kamrup district. The area where turmeric was produced in large quantities latter came to be known as Haldhibari (in Dandua). Jaluguti and Haldhibari are now within the Marigaon district. So also the case with the kingdoms of Ghagua and Tarani, these kingdoms were famous for production of plenty of bananas and they were called Gaghua-Kalbari and Tarani-Kalbari.
The people of the vassal kingdoms being tribals had close cooperation in the pursuits of agricultural activities. The people living in the same or neighbouring villages helped each other in their agricultural activities. Without their mutual cooperation it was difficult to clear or reclaim jungly lands or marshy land for cultivation. The reclamation process of jungly or marshy lands necessitated huge amount of labour force. Thus the agricultural activities from the beginning to the harvesting stage required extensive cooperation and mutual help and this system of mutual help and cooperation has been called the 'hadari khet'.

Industry

The village artisans usually produced the required number of tools and implements for the agricultural activities. Besides producing the tools and implements, they made the furniture and other household requirements like utensils. Every household had been a miniature factory producing various types of baskets, kula, chalani, dala, panchi, bishani, duli, kharahi, japa, duni, etc. All these articles were made of bamboo.

There was no separate class for the production of clothes. All the people irrespective of caste and creed produced their own clothing at home. Every household had a handloom as part of domestic industry. Halliram Dhekial Phukan deprecated the universal practice of spinning and weaving prevailing in Assam.
The clothes were of different kinds, such as cotton, *muga*, *pat* (silk) and *endi* (ari). Despite the universal practice of spinning and weaving, there was a specific caste of people called *jugi* who mastered the art of rearing *pat palo* (silk worms) for the production of silk thread and clothes. Cotton clothes formed an important item of tributes undertaken to be paid by the vassal kings of Dimorua, Darrang and other chiefs of Kamrup to the Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-41).

Kapahera- a locality in the Mikirgaya kingdom- produced huge quantities of cotton and in Charipuniya a big market was held only for sale of cotton. Traders and merchants from distant places like Palasbari, Rani, Luki, Beltola visited this market in connection with cotton business. Muga worms were reared in large scale in areas called Mashkhowa, Lokakuchi- Patrabari in Barepujia kingdom, Tarani in Tarani- Kalbari, and Jagi in Kumoi- Kacharigaya kingdom and huge quantities of *muga* (golden silk) threads and clothes were produced in these places. Oujari and Gerua in Baghara kingdom were famous for the production of *endi* clothes.

*Bhangra* or *Bhanguri*- a kind of machinery essential for the preparation of silk and muga threads- was locally produced by the village artisans in the village of Lukakuchi- Patrabari. The cotton gin (*neothani*) for separating seeds from the fibre was also produced by the village artizans of Kumoi, Tetelia and Damal kingdoms.

Oil mills, called *ghani*, were established almost in every village for extracting edible oil from mustard seeds. The *ghani* was also used in extracting oil from castor and *nahar* (mesuaferrea) seeds to use as fuel in lighting lamps in the night.
Molasses was prepared from the juice of sugarcane. It was prepared in two different varieties, liquid and solid. The liquid was preserved in earthen pots.

The preparation of rice beer was common with all the tribal peoples of the vassal kingdoms. The rice beer has been called the 'Zu'. The preparation and consumption of rice beer have been the common practice among all the tribal peoples inhabiting the Brahmaputra valley since long time past.

The people did not have improved system of machinery. The tools and implements used in the production system were of rude nature. They used hoe, plough (with iron plough- share), harrow (moi), dolimari (a wooden bloc attached vertically to a stick for powdering the clod of earth), Jaboka (a big comb like instrument attached to a stick to act as handle used for clearing grass and jungles from the ploughed field), sickle (kanchi), banka or hulamri (a bar either of bamboo or split bamboo used for carrying by the shoulder goods fastened to both ends), dao, various kinds of knifes, axe, etc.

The artisans were variously known as carpenter, potter, blacksmith, brazier (moria), goldsmith and tanner. The carpenter made all kinds of wooden articles including household furniture, agricultural, fishing and hunting tools and implements. The carpenter usually made different types of fishing tools and implements of bamboo like jakoi (a triangular shaped instrument with handle), polo (a kind of trap handled by the fishermen in deep water) chepa (a kind of trap placed in a narrow channel with a small opening), dingora, dalanga, ban and pacha, etc. Guru-carita Katha mentions several fishing tools such as Dingara, Pauri, Chepa, Khoka, Polo, Jhuluki, Jal (net), Jakai, and Ghani.

The tribal people of the vassal kingdoms had developed a technique of preserving fish for consumption in a latter period, particularly when the supply of the fish became scarce. In the first instance, they dried up the smaller fishes
then these were grounded into smaller particles with the help of dhenki (the traditional grinder machine) and after mixing it up with medicinal plants kept it in bamboo tubes (sunga) or in earthen pots. Sometimes the pot containing the dried fish was kept buried under the soil. This kind of dried fish was called sukuti. Besides using these fishes as food articles the people also used them as medicines against malaria. The sukuti acted as curative and preventive medicine. The preparation of dried fish took place in the months of August to January. There grew up a great market for the dry fish in Tupakuchi in the Dimorua kingdom. Subsequently Jagiroad also developed into a great market for dry fish. It is now the greatest dry fish market in Asia.

The potter made earthen articles including cooking utensils, musical instruments like khol and mridanga, etc. It is on record that Sankardev (1449-1569) - the great vaishnavite saint- reformer of Assam- called upon the potter of the mouth of Kapili river to make khol and mridanga with the mud of that river. Dharamtul, Hariamukh, Kashadhara- kumargaon and Damal respectively in the Khola, Tupakuchia, Barepujia and Damal kingdoms were famous centres of pottery industry.

The blacksmiths were as important as any other artisans in the vassal kingdom, they usually procured iron from the Garos in the markets at Palasbari and Gohain- hat (Guwahati?). The ancestors of Bhibhi Kamar were famous blacksmiths. They settled at a place near the present day Kamarjan (a dug out canal) in Khairgarh Rajya (kingdom). They were experts in making arms and weapons for warfare. They procured iron from Baligaon in Tupakuchia kingdom, from Akhoiphuta (in Karbi Anglong), Lahowal, Tingkhang, Namdang and foot hills of Nagaland.
There was also a factory for the production of weaponry in a place called Hiloikhunda in the kingdom of Mayang. There was another factory at Kamarpur in the Dandua kingdom. The factory in Gobha kingdom was at Kamarkuchi.

The means of transport was mainly boat. Assam has been a riverine country and it has been within the highest monsoon region of the world. The Brahmaputra forms the main artery of communication. The land was also gifted with valuable trees for construction of boats. Naturally, therefore, there grew up a flourishing boat industry. It was necessary both for trade and commerce and for warfare. The boat was also necessary for the nadial or koibarta— the class of people engaged in fishing activities.

Naokata, Hiloikhunda and Ajarbari respectively in the kingdoms of Dandua, Mayang and Tetelia were famous centres of boat-making.18

Various shields made of buffalo hide and rhino-skins were in use mainly in warfare. These are found even today in almost all the vassal kingdoms. The main centre of shield manufacturing was at Barukata (Manaha) in Kumoi-Kacharigayan kingdom.

The materials used in the construction of houses consisted of bamboo, wood, thatch and reed. The houses were of different types, the living house, the kitchen, the guest-house, the store-house (bharal), the cow-shed (gohali), the grinder-house (dhenkisal), and the prayer-house. The materials were usually procured from the jungle/forest.

Besides the family prayer-house, every village used to have a common namghar (prayer-house). This was due to the influence of the neo-vaishnavite reform movement of saint Sankardeva. The establishment of namghar and the Hinduisation of the tribal people went hand in hand during the period of our study. The namghar played a very crucial role in the social life of the people
living both in the Ahom kingdom as well as in the vassal kingdoms. According to Kalita, "Cutting across caste taboos and social barriers," the neo-vaishnavite movement "largely contributed towards healthy social relations".19 Maheswar Neog writes, it "brought about a new and comprehensive outlook on life and a distinctly healthy tone to social behaviour."20

On the contribution of the namghar to Assamese social evolution, Kalita writes, "Besides being the place of theatrical performances called 'Bhaona' and other allied cultural activities of the villagers, the nam-ghar which was erected almost in every village in Assam also became subsequently the meeting place of village elders to hold discussions on matters of general interest, and thus it came to be treated as 'a venue of village pancayats'. As a matter of fact, Satra became an integral part of Assamese social life and discipline, a seat of law and justice, education and art and culture."21

Trade and Commerce
The economy was not monetised. In the absence of a common medium of exchange, i.e., money, trade and commerce was done through barter. Hence it was a barter economy. The Ahom kings minted coins primarily to commemorate the event of their accessions to the throne. Sudangpha or Bamuni Konwar is said to have been the first Ahom king to mint coins.22 The prevalence of the practice of minting coins by the Ahom kings can not necessarily be concluded as proof of these coins being used as medium of exchange. This was due mainly to the non-existence of commodity production in the Ahom kingdom.

Though there was no evidence to prove that money was in circulation as a medium of exchange, the prices of articles were being determined in cowries that was in circulation in certain parts of the Ahom kingdom.23 The same practice prevailed in the vassal kingdoms. Besides cowries, Narayani rupee (issued by
the Koch King Narnarayan and his successors) was in use in the Koch kingdom as well as in the territories occupied by them lying from Narayanpur (in Lakhimpur district) in the east to Goalpara in the west.\(^{24}\)

There are ample references to rupee, half-rupee (ad- maha or adhuli), quarter-rupee (saratia or siki), duana, ana, etc. in the Guru-\(\text{carit Katha}.\)\(^{25}\)

Almost all the kings brought under subjugation by Chilarai- the general of Maharaj Narnarayan of the Koch kingdom- agreed to pay tributes, among others, in terms of hundreds and thousands of rupees. The amount of rupees as agreed to be paid as tributes by these conquered chiefs/kings were as follows,\(^{26}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Kachari king</td>
<td>Rs. 70,000/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Manipuri king</td>
<td>Rs. 20,000/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tripura king</td>
<td>Rs. 10,000/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sylhet king</td>
<td>Rs. 3,00,000/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Khairam king</td>
<td>Rs. 15,000/-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was no mention of the Ahom king Sukhampha or Khora Raja having agreed to pay money/rupee as constituting tributes to the Koch king.\(^{27}\)

Thus it appears that the circulation of money as medium of exchange did not exist in the Ahom kingdom, while the prevalence of money along with cowries marked the economy of the vassal kingdoms.

But despite this fact, the information provided by the Guru Carita Katha, Bardowa- Guru Carita, Haliram Dhekial Phukan\(^{28}\) Barbaruah\(^{29}\) and Gait\(^{30}\) suggest the prevalence of coins along with cowries since the middle of the 16th century in the Ahom kingdoms as well as in the vassal kingdoms. Sihabuddin Talish writes, "The currency of this country consists of cowries and rupees and gold coins stamped with the stamp of the Raja. Copper coins are not current."\(^{31}\)

Thus it can be said with certain degree of accuracy that money along with
cowries were in circulation as medium of exchange in a limited scale since the middle of the 16th century in the Ahom kingdom.

There were several trade centres in the vassal kingdoms. The Ahom kings followed a policy of rigid exclusiveness or isolationism. The Ahom king imposed restriction on the Ahom subjects visiting the other lands without the permission of the sovereign and the people of other country visiting the Ahom kingdom without his prior permission. Sihabuddin Talish says, "Their kings neither allow foreigners to enter their land, nor permit any of their own subjects to go out of it." The officials called frontier wardens were to keep a strict vigil on the movement of people from within and outside. The Barphukan of Guwahati along with the frontier wardens were responsible for maintaining this discipline.

This was followed in the conduct of trade and commerce also. Sihabuddin Talish who accompanied Mir Jumla during the latter's invasion of Assam in 1661-62 had this to say, "Formerly once in a year, by order of the Raja, a party used to go for trade to their frontier near Gauhati; they gave gold, musk, aloe wood, pepper, spikenard and silk cloth in exchange for salt, saltpetre, sulphur and certain other products of India which the people of Gauhati used to take thither."

Assam had a flourishing trade, both external and internal. She conducted her commercial relations with her neighbouring peoples and countries like the Nagas, the Khasis, the Jaintias, the Garos, the Bhutias, the Tibetans and the Chinese through Tibet and Bengal.

Salt was scarce in Assam, it was primarily imported from Bengal, Sadiya and Bhutan. Assam did not have copper and she imported it from the khamptis of Sadiya, the Daflas of the Dafla hills, and from the Miris, the Garos and from Bengal. Assam also did not have silver and the same was imported from
China. Robinson writes "The silver formerly used in Assam was in great measure imported from China in a state of bullion, and was the only article of circulation in the trade between the Assamese and the Chinese." 37

The Bhutanese, Tibetan and Chinese trade was done through the duars situated in Kamrup and in the vassal kingdom of Darrang. These duars were passes through which the traders and merchants of those countries came down to the foot- hills for trading purposes mainly in the winter season. The duars in Kamrup were five in numbers and they were known as Gharkola, Baska, Chapaguri, Chapakhamar and Bijni.38 The duars in the vassal kingdom of Darrang were Buriguma, Kiling, Kariapar, Char- duar, and Na- duar and Chouna and Gegunshur, etc.39

Rock Salt and silver were the articles of trade from the Tibetan- Chinese side, while, rice, silk cloth, iron, lac, animal skins, buffalo horns, pearls and coral from the Assam side. The trade with Tibet at Chouna amounted to one lac of rupees and it was paid in silver bullion. 40

The Assam- Bhutan trade consisted of articles such as musk, blankets, cow- tails, small horses, gola- burax, rock- salt and various kinds of clothes from Bhutan side, while from Assam side it consisted of lac, muga silk, muga cloth, endi cloth, and dry fishes.41 The Assam- Bhutan trade amounted to Rs. 2,00,000 a year. 42

The management of the duars was entrusted to an officer called Wazir Baruah with his residence at Simalibari or Simalabari.43

The vassal kingdoms in the south bank of the Brahmaputra also had extensive trade relations with the hill peoples bordering these kingdoms. During the reign of Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-41) the Phulaguri hat (market) was established. Earlier there had been two trading centres at Sonabar and Rupabar
for commercial transaction with the Garos and Jaintias. Later these trading centres were shifted to Phulaguri. 44

During the reign of Rajeswar Singha (1751-69) a hat was established at Gobha with Lehetia as Duaria Baruah.45 Kirti Chandra Barbaruah also established a hat (market) at Raha with the Chowkial Baruah Krishnagaty as Hatkhowa. This official was entrusted with the duty of collecting tools from the market. 46

Other trading centres were at Mayang, Sonapur, Beltola, Guwahati, Rani, Palasbari, Barduar, Odalguri, Hajo, Goalpara, Rangamati, Jogighopa, Hadira Chowki, etc. both for internal and external trade and commerce. The articles of trade in the Mayang hat consisted of salt, blankets, yak tail, kasturi, chandan wood, cotton, dry fish, oil, gold, rice, milk, ghee, pulses, black pepper, areca nut, betel leaves, cows, etc. 47

In Assam the traders, pedlars and merchants were called banik, mudai, bepari, saud, sajai, sadagar and pohari. 48

It may be mentioned here that the socio-economic condition of the people of the vassal kingdoms as well as those of the Ahom kingdom was the same. There was hardly any difference in the system of production and the standard of living. The difference was only in political-territorial situation. The whole society was in a semi-tribal semi-feudal stage of production and development.

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10. Ibid., p. 88


14 Neog, *op.cit.*, p.430


21 Kalita, in Deka, K.M., ed., *op.cit.*, p.103

22 Baruah, S.L., *op.cit.*, p.40


Neog, ed., 1977, op.cit, pp. 52, 78-79, 83 Neog, ed., 1987, pp. 53, 237, 277, 400, 456. Neog writes, "Coin currency was prevalent in both Ahom and koc States; but for people in general barter was the rule, as ordinary commodities of daily use could readily be exchanged for each other. The Ahom and the Koc States minted their own coins; but Koc coin currency spread over Asam (sic) too, and these coins were known as Narayani or Narengi (from the 'narayana' part of the monarchs' names)- the Narayani silver rupee, half-rupee, quarter-rupee, two-anna and one-anna denominations. Cowries formed the small currency. Gold coins of higher value also were there." Introduction, ibid., p. 148

Gait, op.cit., pp. 52-54

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