

A Study of Markets, Trade Routes, and Currency Under the Ahom Government

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Abstract

The economic activities of the Ahom kingdom were evident through its establishment and regulation of *hats* (small markets), trade routes, *chaukies* (outposts) and creation of various official posts. Ahom kings such as Dihingia Raja, Pratap Singha, Gadadhar Singha, and Rudra Singha and Rajeshwar Singha established numerous towns and hats in strategic locations like Borhat, Moranhat, Rajahat and Gobha, as well as in the frontier and Duars regions. Trade articles included agricultural produce such as sugarcane, pepper, mustard seeds, ironware, and livestock. Trade was initially carried out through the barter system but was gradually replaced by the use of cowries and coinage. External trade was carried out through various river and overland routes that connected Assam with countries such as Bhutan, Tibet, and China. This paper attempts to study the trading activities, importance of towns, hats (small markets), and the currency system in medieval Assam under the administration of the Ahom government.

Keywords: King, Ahoms, Hats (Markets), Trade Route, Chaukey, Currency,

Introduction

The rule of the Ahom dynasty in Assam is considered one of the most prestigious episodes in the history of Assam. Migrating from Burma, King Sukapha, who along with his royal family entered the Brahmaputra Valley via the Patkai range in the thirteenth century and founded the Ahom Kingdom. This dynasty ruled for around 600 years and successfully resisted Mughal invasions more than seventeen times. It was a dynasty that produced kings like Rudra Singha whose reign is considered a glorious chapter in Assam's history, and Lachit Borphukan, the army general of the Ahom forces, who successfully defeated the powerful forces of the Mughal Empire in the famous Battle of Saraighat in 1671.

The rule of the Ahom period is significant not only for its political achievements, victories, and consolidation of power but also for its administrative structure, fostering of trade and commerce, and the establishment of new towns and hats (small market). The practice of keeping written records known as *Buranjis* (Chronicles) is a significant contribution of the Ahom dynasty. The *Buranjis* and other historical account of this period provide us with valuable information about the political, social, and economic history of medieval Assam.

The Ahom government brought significant changes to the administrative system. They created various official post for different purposes, created different khels for various production and services, established new towns and numerous hats (small markets) in strategic locations within the kingdom and its frontier regions. Rules and regulations were implemented to conduct the both internal and external trade. Numerous chaukies were established to supervise both internal and external trade. The Ahom government took all these measures for the welfare of its subjects and to strengthen the economic condition of the state. The rule Ahom period is significant not

only for political achievements , victory and consolidation of power but also for its administrative structure, encouragement of trade and commerce, establishment of new towns and hats (small market)

Objectives

This paper emphasizes on the markets, trade routes, and currency system of medieval Assam. The main objectives of the study are to understand the development of economic activities under the Ahom government and to examine the role of the Ahom kings in fostering trade and regulating the economy.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is descriptive-cum-analytical. This study is primarily based on secondary sources of information. Relevant materials and data have been collected from a variety of sources including books, articles, and web-based sources

Hats (Small Markets)

References to the establishment of *hats* (small markets) are found in the *Buranjis* and other historical accounts , such as the *Charit Puthis* (biographies of Vaishnavite saints), as well as in the accounts of foreign authors. To promote internal trade, a mart was set up at Dalauguri by Dihingia Raja. Suklenmung established one on the bank of the Dikhow, while Pratap Singha set up markets at Dopdar and Borhat to encourage exchange of goods with the Nagas. Sutyunpha established a mart at Marangi to promote trade with Cachar. Godadhar Singha set up two trade marts at Chakihat and Rajahat. A mart was established at Gobha by Rudra Singha and another at Disoi by Rajeswar Singha.

In addition to these royal initiatives, markets were also developed by the common people for specific articles For example, Tamulihat (a market for areca nuts), Sariyahat (a market for mustard seeds), Darangihat, Sonapurhat, Dihinghat, Moranhat, Nagahat and Kacharihat developed to support a local economy.

The articles of produce brought to the market included betel leaves, areca nuts, lime, black pepper, ginger, mustard seeds, earthenware, ironware and livestock such as cattle, goats, buffaloes, ducks. Transactions were usually carried out through the barter of commodities or by using cowries as a medium of exchange. The internal market operated under established regulations and official supervision, which governed sales tax, prices of articles and other matters. Officials known as Hatlkhawas were appointed to collect market tolls (*hatkar*) based on the prices of goods as fixed by the king which, of course, varied from time to time.

Chaukey

Chaukies or *Chokies* were established at strategic locations to collect duties and control illegal transport of goods. For instance, King Pratap Singha erected a custom house on the Brahmaputra River at Solaphat, or Sewlal Choky as recorded in Wood's survey, to collect tolls from the Daflas and other tribes and duties on all goods coming from Kamrup and the border areas. The same king also established *Chokies* at Kajali and Jagi and introduced tolls, on the markets and river *ghats*. The area called Mayong in Nagaon district seems to have been an

important inland *Chokey*, where two officers, Dhekiyal Phukan and Cholahdara Phukan collected tolls on passing articles such as salt, blankets, yak tails, musk, cotton, dried fish and gold.

Among all the custom *Chokies*, the most important was Kandar or Kandahar, also known as Assam *Chokey* located at the mouth of the river Manah opposite Goalpara on the western frontier of Assam. It was established to supervise the commercial transactions between Bengal and Assam as Kandahar was the principal emporium of trade on the Assam frontier. Despite the presence of Jogighopa and six other *Chokies* along the bank of the Brahmaputra River, Kandahar held prominence due to its high volume of commercial activity conducted there. In addition to its customs responsibilities, the general administration of the surrounding area was also placed under a royal officer known as the Kandahar Barua, also called the Duaria Barua, who was assisted by subordinate officers called as Bairagis and Kakatis.

The Ahom monarchs not only granted certain rights to border tribes in the plains but also set up *hats* and fairs for the exchange of commodities at places convenient to both sides. For instance, strips of land commonly known as the Duars were granted to the Deb and the Dharma Rajas of Bhutan. These included Buriguma and Kalling in the district of Darrang and Chappaguri, Buxa, Bijni, Chappakhmar in the north of Kamrup. An officer known as the Uzir Barua controlled a Assam-Bhutan trade from a place called Simalabari. Merchants of Assam exported rice, coarse and silk cloth, lac, iron, horns, pearls, corals, dried fish and Assam *muga* in exchange for yak tails, gold dust, salt, horses and Chinese silk.

The articles of Abor-Assam trade in the frontier areas of present-day Arunachal Pradesh involved hill tribes bringing down *majati* (*Rubia Munjista*), ginger chillies, , woollens in exchange for salt, cotton cloth, iron, silver, and dried fish. The Mishmi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh acted as intermediaries in the trade between the Assamese, Tibetan and Chinese. They brought goods to the mart at Sadiya, including Mishmi Tita (*Coptis teeta*), swords, ivory, musk, spears and *gatheon* (a perfume) which they exchanged for glass beads, various kinds of cloth, salt and cattle.

Regarding Assam-Bengal trade, medieval historical sources record that, in exchange for elephant tusks, silk cloth, musk, pepper, yak tails, *agar* or aloe wood and aromatic plants, the Assamese merchants imported salt, spices, garments of various kinds, articles of daily use and chemicals-particularly saltpetre and sulphur.

The trading articles may be categorized from the perspective of imports and exports, and zone wise into four regions as follows:

Imports

Imported articles from Bengal or western regions included red lead, copper and other metals, Bengal cotton mainly of the coarser kind, *chinty*, woollens of Europe chiefly of the coarser kind, cloves, nutmegs, cinnamon, salt and orpiment (a variety of drugs).

From the southern region, the Garos supplied cotton, iron, coarse cloth and copper. The Naga supplied cotton, red hair, *Nagajatee* (spears), *Narakapore* (embroidered silk), *Toatbund* (silk cloth) and *Luckibillia* (a type of silk cloth).

From the northern regions, Bhutanese supplied cow tails, small horses, Rock salt, *Goom Sing* (an embroidered cloth), musk, Blankets, *Naint* (a kind of cloth) and *Daroka* a silk of a mixture of green, red and yellow colours.

Import items of eastern parts included Cotton, Copper and Spring Salt.

Exports

Export articles in the category of vegetable products included sugarcane, pepper vine, poppy, indigo, mustard seed, ginger and tobacco. In the category of minerals, the main exports were gold, iron and saltpetre. Among exported animals products were lac, *muga silk*, elephant's teeth, rhinoceros horn and buffalo hide and deer skins.

Trade Routes

Trade in medieval was carried out through both river and land routes. A total four routes were used to reach Bengal, one by water and three by land. The river route followed the Brahmaputra river, starting from Goalpara. From there, it proceeded via the Jennai from Jamalpur and entered the Pabna river, a navigable branch of the Ganges. After proceeding up the Pabna river, boats reached the mouth of the Matabanga or the Jellengi, either of which led to Calcutta.

The first overland route passed through Murshidabad, Maldah, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bagwa, and Goalpara, this was also the line connecting to Calcutta. The second route passed via Dacca, Dummary, Puculoe, Jamalpur, Singimari, and Goalpara. The third route went through Sylhet, Cherra, Moplung, Hungklao, Ranigaon, Khanamukh, and Guwahati. The last two overland were almost unusable during the rainy season. Therefore, commercial transportation was popularly conducted through the river route and the first overland route.

Reference to five routes leading from Sadiya into Tibet or China proper are found in the book "*Topography of Assam*" authored by M' Cosh, as trade with Tibet and Bhutan was considered more profitable. These routes included: the pass of Dibong, the Mishmi route, the Phungan pass to Manchee and China, the route via Manipur to the Irrawaddy, and the Patkai pass to Bhamo on the Irrawaddy.

The most important and accessible route starting from the north-eastern side was via the Patkai Pass to the upper districts of Burma and from there to China. This was the route through which Ahom entered the Brahmaputra Vally and was also used by the Burmese invaders.

There was another route leading to Tibet that passed across the Himalayan Mountains, running parallel to the course of Brahmaputra River. Historian Minhaj-us-Siraj mentioned in his historical work *Tabaquat-i-Nasiri* that there were 35 mountain passes between Kamrup and Tibet, through which horses were brought to Lakhnauti. Historical sources also refer to a trade route to Kabul through Bhutan along the mountains and also state the possibility of commercial transactions between Assam and Kabul through this route.

Currency

Initially, internal trade in the Ahom kingdom was usually conducted through the barter system. However, with the gradual expansion of external trade, the circulation of money began, though

it remained relatively limited in scope. Shihabuddin Talish refer to the use of currency in the Ahom kingdom, which consisted of cowries, rupees, and gold coins. One of the important historical sources of medieval period, the Buranjis mention various forms of currency such as mohar (coin), taka, sicca rup (rupees), siki or maha (quarter rupee), adhali (half-rupee), charatiya (one-sixth of a rupee) and kara or kari (cowrie). During the reign of Gaurinath Singha, coins such as Aad-maha and Charatiya were minted for the first time. Koch coins, known as Narayani Mudra were also accepted in Assam.

From the reign of Rudra Singha onward, the increase in external trade led to an increase in the circulation of money. Certain inscriptions mentioned the prices of various commodities such as rice, oil, ghee, goat, and pigeon in connection with the custom of worship in different temples of the Ahom kingdom. This indicates that the barter economy of the state was in the process of being replaced by a money economy, which was the outcome of Assam's developing economic connections with both with feudal India and the neighbouring countries of the Northeast.

Conclusion

The study clearly shows that the Ahom government regulated a feasible and dynamic economic system, which indicate a combination of traditional practices and evolving external commercial activities. Establishment of *hats* (markets) and *Chaukies* (outpost) in strategic place reflects the serious effort of Ahom government to promote of trade and commerce, as well as its administrative concern for economic affair and the overall development of the kingdom. The appointment of officials such as Hatlkhawas and Baruas clearly demonstrates the proactive role of the Ahom government. They were responsible for the collection of taxes, maintaining law and order and checking illegal activities within their respective jurisdictions. *Chaukies* (outpost) such as Kandahar, Jagi, and Solaphat were established to monitor the movement of internal and external trade, collect custom duties and prevent tax evasion.

To facilitate the cross border trade and maintain harmony among people inhabiting the frontier region, several frontier mart were established particularly in the foothills and Duars areas. Both riverine and overland trade routes were developed to conduct trade with Bengal, adjoining tribal regions, and neighbouring countries such as Bhutan, Tibet, China, even with Kabul. Regarding trading articles, Assam exported a wide variety of local product agricultural goods, minerals, forest products textiles like *muga* silk, and animal products such as elephant tusk, and rhinoceros horn. It also imported item such as metals, salt, cloth, and other goods from neighbouring regions. The evidence of the circulation of various units of coins under the Ahom government, along with the acceptance of Narayani Mudra for commercial transactions, marks this period as one of transition and evolution from a barter based economy to a money economy. In conclusion, the trade system under Ahom rule not only made the kingdom self-sufficient but also established it as a key player in the commercial network of adjoining regions as well as neighbouring countries.

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