

# **A Study of Towns, Trade and Taxation system in Medieval Assam**

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## **Abstract**

The present paper an attempt to analyse the growth of towns and trading activities as well as the system of taxation system in Assam during the period under study. The towns were filled by the various kinds of artisans and they produced numerous types of crafts such as textiles Sericulture, Dyeing, Gold and Silver works, Copper and Brass works, Iron works, Gunpowder, Bow and Arrow making, Boat-building, Woodcraft, Pottery and Clay modelling, Brick making, Stone works, Ivory, and carving works. The crafts of Assam were much demand in local markets as well as other regions of India. The towns gradually acquired the status of urban centres of production and distribution. Regular, weekly and fortnightly markets as well as fairs from time to time were held throughout Assam where the traders purchased with their goods for sale. In the business, community, which was, included the whole-sellers, retailers and brokers; they all had a flourishing business. Therefore, the towns were the one of the major source of income as a result the kings of Assam had built several customhouses, many gateways and toll gates in order to raise taxes of imports and exports and to check the activities of the merchants' class. The source materials have been utilised various kinds of primary sources such as epigraphical records, coins, inscriptions, literary sources, travellers account as well as secondary works.

**Key Words:** Towns, Trade, Artisans, Crafts, Taxation, production, Sources

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## INTRODUCTION

In The present study is related to economic aspect of medieval Assam mainly growth of urban centres, trading activities and taxation policy of the Ahom kings during the period under study. Some modern scholars has researched on the economic history of Assam but touched few aspects on trade, towns and taxation system in medieval Assam. Therefore, this study is an attempt to analyse the growth of urban centres and the trading activities during the period under review.

During the Ahom rule in medieval Assam, significant changes took place with the introduction new administrative system, which had largely determined the economy of Assam. The Ahom kings introduced different *khels* such as *sonowal khel*, *moriya khel*, *kalita khel*, *sonari khel*, *potiya khel*, *katani khel*, *duliya khel*, *sonsowa khel*, *kamar khel*, *kumar khel*, *kukurapohiya khel* etc. under *paik* system and established many villages for them. Gradually these villages become important urban centres of manufacturing as well as trade and commerce.<sup>1</sup> The *khels* were organize under royal supervision on professional basis to supply essential commodities and arms to royal store. As crafts carried under guild system, thus trade in association with variety of articles remained a usual matter.<sup>2</sup>

The Ahom kings were the maker of towns and *hats* (small markets). They promoted local trade by making small markets and encouraged long distance trade under some limitations for internal security. The kings built their capital towns in such places, which were exceptional from the point of protection and security. There were many places, which acquired prominence owing to their strategic locations, trade and commerce, religious and markets political activities.<sup>3</sup> The economic activities such as manufacturing, crafts and industries, trade and commerce shifted partially to the towns. The kings, royal families, nobilities lived in capital towns. The towns generally fascinated various professional groups such builders, artisans, craftsmen, manufacturers, traders and others.<sup>4</sup>

## METHOD AND MATERIALS

As far as the methodology is concerns, the work has been accomplish through both primary sources and secondary works materials collected from different archival records, libraries books, edited books, coins, inscriptions and journals.

## DISCUSSION

As mentioned that the Ahom kings built their capital towns in such places, which were distinctive from the point of protection and security because the kings, nobilities, lived with their families in these towns. The towns naturally attracted various professional groups such builders, artisans, manufacturers, traders and others consequently, they significantly contributed in the development of new urban centres as well as enhanced economic prosperity of Assam. During the period of being the seats of royal residences, these towns were humming with economic activities. These capitals assumed political importance for a certain period of the

<sup>1</sup> Sarbananda Rajkumar. *Itihashe Soara Chasata Bachar* , Banlata: Dibrugarh, 2000.p. 161

<sup>2</sup> SL. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. New Delhi :M.M. Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2007, p. 433

<sup>3</sup> Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati: Bina Library, 2001, p. 301

<sup>4</sup> NK. Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age*, Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1970, pp. 180-183

history and relapsed into their original rural status as soon they had ceased to be royal seats. Many roads, tanks, temples, forts, walls, *chowki*, *hat*, *phat*, *ghat*, *satra* and houses were constructed in systematic order. The kings established many highly educated persons, artist, traders and others professional community. There were dense habitants and a narrow market road on the both banks of Dikhu River. Shihabuddin Talish noticed a bazar at Garhgaon in 1660 CE. The traders of the *hat* or market were only the betel-nut sellers, who used to sit beside a narrow road.<sup>5</sup>

Outside the palace, neat and pure mansion was built for the residence of the king and the nobles have built nice and strong houses near the royal palace. It can be mention that the Garhgaon was the actual capital town of Assam and Rangpur was military centre.<sup>6</sup> Gadadhar Singha built a town at Barkola situated nearby Karenghar and a part of greater Garhgaon.<sup>7</sup> Rangpur was also an important capital town of the Ahoms built by Rudra Singha in the beginning of the eighteenth century. It served as the capital of Ahom monarchs for eighty years long and due to the frequent attacks of Moamaria insurgents, the capital shifted to Jorhat during the reign of Gaurinath Singha.<sup>8</sup> The Jayasagar Sadasiva Temple inscription states Rudra Singha developed the town at Meteka known as Rangpur and fort at Teji. He then built tanks and *doulas* and placed with idols of gods and goddesses.<sup>9</sup> Jorhat was another important flourishing town established by Ahom monarch Gourinath Singha in 1789 CE on the bank of Dichai River. Purnananda Buragohain, the minister of Gourinath Singha built two markets on the both banks of Bhogdai River.<sup>10</sup> J.P. Wade states the town is eight miles in length and six miles in breadth. The town on the east is bounded by the Desoi River, Dhuli on the west, Kuntiapota in the north and a high way on the south. A road to Manipur, Naga Mountains run through this place.<sup>11</sup> Biswanath was a thickly populated place and was very important due to political, commercial and religious activities. It was the capital of king Arimatta of the fourteenth century and prominent religious place. In this temple the higher officials and small chieftains, tributary monarchs would take oath of allegiance to their master. It is recorded that here, Tamradhvaja, the Kachari king and Rama Simha, the Jayantia king took oath of allegiance to Rudra Singha. Trade carried from this point to the frontier regions.<sup>12</sup>

Gauhati has been the capital of Assam since the early times, several kings of several dynasties made this town as their capitals because of its strategic position.<sup>13</sup> It is encircled by hills in the east, west and south and greater Brahmaputra in the north. According to Maheswar Neog Gauhati situated on the bank of Brahmaputra and associated with betel- nut. Beside betel-nut others commodities were sold and purchased in Gauhati.<sup>14</sup> Shihabuddin Talish mentions that under the order of king a group of traders of Bengal used to visit Gauhati for trade. They

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<sup>5</sup> Sarbananda Rajkumar, *Itihashe Soara Chasata Bachar*, Op.Cit., pp. 274-276

<sup>6</sup> Benudhar Sharma (ed). *An Account of Assam*, Guwahati : Assam Jyoti Suwagpur, , 1972, p. 348

<sup>7</sup> Sarbananda Rajkumar, *Itihashe Soara Chasata Bachar*, Op.Cit., p. 278

<sup>8</sup> SN Sarma, *A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam*, Guwahati: Bina Library, , 2001, pp. 76-77

<sup>9</sup> M. Neog, *Prachya-Sasanavali*, Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, , 1974.p. 90

<sup>10</sup> Jahnabi Nath Gogoi, *Agrarian System in Medieval Assam*, New Delhi : Concept Publishing Company, , 2002, p. 153

<sup>11</sup> Benudhar Sharma (ed), *An Account of Assam*, Op.Cit., p. 347

<sup>12</sup> SN. Sarma, *A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam*, Op.Cit., p. 79

<sup>13</sup> ofNN. Bhattacharyya, *A Study in Urban Geography of Gauhati Town*, Unpublished M.Sc. Thesis, Geography, Gauhati University, 2001, p. 4

<sup>14</sup> RD. Choudhury, *Asomot Puratattik Adhyayanor Agragrati*, Guwahati: Parbati Prakashan Press, , 1992, p. 84

would give commodities like salt, sculpture and other products in exchanged for gold, pepper, silk cloth and aloe wood.<sup>15</sup>

Trade mainly carried on by means of permanent markets as well as weekly *hats* and annual trading fairs. In many villages of Assam such as Barapara, Dij Bogai, Jaipur, Sakumuri, Hakimhat, Malapara and at many places adjoining to the foot of the Khasi hills weekly markets were organized.<sup>16</sup> Market taxes were collected by officers called *Hatkhowas* at a percentage of the price of good as fixed by the king. There were some frontier markets both in northern and southern frontier of Kamrupa were Dimorua, Beltola, Rani, Palasbari, where Khasis, Jayantiyas and Garos were come down from southern hills in large number with their hill commodities. To collect duties and to control illegal transportation of goods tollgates were establish at strategic locations. The Ahom kings not only to grant certain right to border tribes in the adjoining plains but also set up *hats* and fairs for exchange of commodities at convenient places. The trade with Bhutan carried through frontier outposts generally known as the *duar*. The seven *duars*, on the north of Kamrupa were Chappakhmar, Buksa, Bijni, Chappaguri, Gorkola, Buriguma and Kalling. The Assam-Bhutan trade was control by an officer titled Ujir Barua posted at Simaliyabari.<sup>17</sup> Dhubri was also an important fortified place in the west of Assam. The Mughals referred Dhubri as *qasbas* and port town.<sup>18</sup> Bisnupur was famous for disposal of valuable woods and traders from Pabna, Mymensingh, Kumilla, Dhaka, and Rangpur came here for purchasing woods.<sup>19</sup> Barpeta also famous for crafts and peddling trade. Therefore, population of this place is more than Gauhati or any other town of the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>20</sup> Besides cotton, varieties of silk cloths were produce and sold in the markets for considerable rate of prices.<sup>21</sup> Palasbari was also famous for weaving of silk fabric. More than one hundred and sixty weavers worked at Palasbari and produced silk fabrics for the Mughals.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Sarthebari, Sualkuchi and Ramdia were also important trade centers, which owed their prominence respectively for bell metal, silk weaving and oil-crushing industries. These activities flourished under the royal patronage. The Ahom kings appointed bell metal workers (*Kahar*), weaver (*tanti*) to temples for the supply of bell metal utensils and cloths.<sup>23</sup> Lakharpara was famous for trade during the period mainly fine and skillfully embroidered cloths.<sup>24</sup> Pandu was also an important trade centre during the period under study.<sup>25</sup> Besides Pandu nearby Kamakhya temple was also growth market for ritual commodities like idol, statue etc.

Apart from market, a famous fair named *Ambubachi mela* was organize as of socio-religious festivals. Imports and exports continued for many days together in this fair.<sup>26</sup> The twon of Nagaon was important for trade and manufacturing of cotton thread. The area was famous for articles made of Bamboo and betel nut. Perhaps materials made of bamboo and betel nut was

<sup>15</sup> Gogoi Nath, Jahnabi, *Agrarian System in Medieval Assam*, Op.Cit., p. 148

<sup>16</sup> WW. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, vol. I, New Delhi: Spectrum Publications, , 1998, p. 42

<sup>17</sup> HK. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. III, Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, , 1994, pp. 124-126

<sup>18</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri & Irfan Habib, *The Cambridge Economic History of India* , New Delhi : Orient Longman Limited, 1984, p.499

<sup>19</sup> RK. Shastri, *Parbat Jowarat Mahamaya*, Dhubri: The Exbow Printers, 2010, pp. 5-6

<sup>20</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri & Irfan Habib, *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Op.Cit., p.499

<sup>21</sup> Jahnabi Nath Gogoi, *Agrarian System in Medieval Assam*, Op.Cit., p. 147

<sup>22</sup> SK. Goswami , *History of Revenue Administration in Assam* , Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1986, p. 110

<sup>23</sup> HK. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam* , Op.Cit., p. 116

<sup>24</sup> Jahnabi Nath Gogoi, *Agrarian System in Medieval Assam*, Op. Cit., p. 147

<sup>25</sup> SL. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Op.Cit., pp.433-344

<sup>26</sup> Jahnabi Nath Gogoi, *Agrarian System in Medieval Assam*, Op.Cit., p. 152

common commercial commodities. During the reign of Rudra Singha every one of Nagaon town was required to plant bamboo and betel nut tree and was to make baskets of bamboo.<sup>27</sup> Kaliabar town the seat of Barphukan was another important urban region of medieval Assam.<sup>28</sup> Apart from this a strong commercial ties was between the Garos and the people plains of Assam.<sup>29</sup> Nazirahat was a small commercial town situated adjacent to capital Garhgaon was another trading centre during medieval Assam.<sup>30</sup>

The Ahom kings encouraged internal trade by making *hats* or markets at convenient locations. King Suhungmung made mart centre at Dalauguri. Then his son Suklenmung established settlement after clearing the jungles of the two banks of the Dikhow River. Hats or markets also flourished in this place for the growing population. King Pratap Singha established two markets at Dopdar and Borhat to encourage exchange of goods with the Nagas. While king Nariya Raja in his short reign even set up hat in order to trade with Kacharis. King Gadadhar Singha set up two markets called Chakihat and king Rajahat. Rudra Singha also set up a market at Gobha for commercial purpose. Along with regional trade, he also encouraged foreign trade. It is recorded that he encourage extensive trade with foreign countries especially with Tibet. Besides these the Ahom kings established markets at various places of Assam like Dihing, Kacharihat, Barhat, Namchang, Abhaypur, Narayanpur etc. where various types of merchandises including birds and animals and even slaves were bought and sold. In order to meet the growing demand of regional trade, permanent, weekly and periodically markets were organized.

Markets were also establish at the foothills in order to carry on trade with the hill tribes. The most important of these marts was at Sadiya, which was the central market for all hill tribes residing the extreme northeast. To this market the Khamtis and the Singphos brought their swords and spears medicinal plants and ivory, copper and silver which they collected from China and the Adis and the Miris presented their spicy vegetables, madder, wax and cotton blankets, which they exchanged for the products of the plains. The Nagas and the Garos mainly brought salt and cotton; the Khasis and the Jayantiyas would present iron implements and honey.

Furthermore, in order to meet the requirements of growing population many other internal markets were also setup. Some places such as Moranhat, Cacharhat, Dihinghat, Darangihat, Nagahat, Sonpurahat, Borhat etc. perhaps indicated markets for specific areas or tribes as the word *hat* in Assamese refers to markets.<sup>31</sup> However, these were perhaps trading place of distinct places or tribes but traders of others places also allowed to import and export of commodities.

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<sup>27</sup> SK. Goswami, *History of Revenue Administration in Assam*, Op.Cit., p. 110

<sup>28</sup> SN. Sarma, *A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam*, Op.Cit., p.78

<sup>29</sup> Jahnabi Nath Gogoi, *Agrarian System in Medieval Assam*, Op.Cit., p. 152

<sup>30</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri & Irfan Habib, *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Op.Cit., p.489

<sup>31</sup> HK. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Op.Cit., p. 121-122

## Taxation System

In order to collect tax on different commodities, king appointed the tax collector known as Hatkhowa *Barua*.<sup>32</sup> The Jagiyal Barua was entrusted with the duty to maintain relation with the Jayantias and looked after their entry and exit to the Ahom territory. Being border outposts, these two places worked as trade centres between the people of plains and the hill tribes. Taxes and tributes for different commodities were release at these outposts in cash or kind. Being frontier outposts, these contained strong military base. Goalpara situated on the south and Jogighopa on the north of Brahmaputra were two important outposts of Bengal from last half of seventeenth century to the end of the Ahom rule. Goalpara and Jogighopa were thickly populated towns and these towns contained several streets and shops. These were important trade centres from where the merchants carried trade between Assam and Bengal.<sup>33</sup> The centre of trade in respect of Bengal was Hadira or the Assam *chaki*. The administration of this post and adjoining regions was entrusted to an officer called the Kandhar Barua.<sup>34</sup> The check post was built in order to control relation with Bengal and to look after the activities of traders as well as the outsiders. A considerable amount of taxes and tributes on commodities was released from this choky. For example, Ahom monarch posted a frontier custom officer named Duariya Barua along with a number of assistant officers. He maintained cordial relation with Bengal and released taxes on import and export commodities and in the later phase, it attained commercial importance. The *Jayantia Buranji* states about many other trading places like Phulguri, Hatiyamukh, Sonapur and Hatarenga. The tribes of Jayantia hills and the Syntengs used to come in these places for commercial purpose, where they sold and purchased various commodities.<sup>35</sup> There were many others *hats* and *phats* in some frontier places Phukanarhat in North Lakhimpur, Kacharihat and Nagaphat in Dayang valley, Khitlurphat in the bank of river Kakdonga and Holarhat at Diphalu. The markets located in <sup>36</sup>frontier areas facilitated commercial transactions with the adjacent hill tribes such as the Kacharis, the Nagas, the Syntengs and the Karbis. The tribes of these areas used to come into these places for commercial purpose, where they sold and purchased various necessary commodities.<sup>37</sup>

## RESULTS

The Ahom administrative system made remarkable contribution towards the growth and development of towns and craft industries in Assam. The *khels* were organize under royal supervision on professional basis to supply necessary commodities and weapons to royal store. As crafts carried under guild system, thus trade in association with variety of articles remained a usual happening. The Ahom kings built capital towns and small markets. They promoted local trade by making small markets and encouraged long distance trade under some restrictions for internal security. The kings built their new towns in suitable location, which were exceptional from the point of protection and security as well as important trade center. In these towns many artisans were involved manufacturing various types of crafts. Therefore, the towns generally attracted various professional groups such builders, artisans, craftsmen, manufacturers, traders

<sup>32</sup> SK. Bhuyan, *Assam Buranji* (fourth edition). *Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies*, Guwahati, 2010, p. 142

<sup>33</sup> SN. Sarma, *A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam*, Op.Cit., pp. 79-80

<sup>34</sup> SK. Bhuyan, *Assam Buranji*, Op.Cit., pp. 50-51

<sup>35</sup> SK. Bhuyan, *Assam Buranji*, Op.Cit., pp. 61-62

<sup>37</sup> SN. Sarma, *A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam*, Op.Cit., p.126

and others. The frontier outposts enabled to carry trade with mountainous tribes and Bengal. Many *duars* and *chokies* were built in order to raise taxes of imports and exports and to check the activities of people for the purpose protection as well as these constituted the security of the kingdom from the invasion of the outsiders.

## CONCLUSION

In short, it can be said that towns were not only seat of royal activities but were also important trade centres. Due to the security reasons, external trade was not encouraged rigorously; but local trade was promoted by establishing several markets nearby towns and in many frontier outposts. The custom officers appointed by Ahom kings had to maintained trade relation with frontier states and released taxes on import and export commodities. Along with maintaining peace with the neighbouring regions, they had to check the activities of the people or outsiders for internal security and peace. Therefore, check posts gained commercial importance and for which these become meeting place of various trading groups. The overall economic condition of medieval Assam was not satisfactory because trade potentiality of Assam was not utilize properly. Most of the Ahom monarchs seem to have adopted policy of isolation, forbade outsiders to enter, and did not allow them to settle in Assam for the purpose of security. In fact, the people of Assam were not allowed to leave the country and settle outside territories. Therefore, they considered local trade as an integral part of economy and did not given importance in long distance trade. Several markets had built under royal patronization, but this did not have much impact on the rural people. Small townships that grew covering small areas were concentrated within a few people.

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