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### *Abstract*

The *paik* system is an outstanding administrative machinery of Ahom for 600 years of rule. The engagement of all the male folk in agriculture work as well as in military service in war time through the *paik* system reduces the unemployment and military expenses. Besides, it was an instrument to control unrest activities of indigenous tribes by engaging all male adult in to *paik* system. All adult male between 16 to 50 years old had rendered personal service to the state under the *paik* system. This type of collective engagement of all adult male in the state services builds a strong Ahom rule.

Key words: *paik, military, agriculture, employment, domination.*

### **Introduction**

The Ahom are the member of Shan stock of Thai family migrated to Assam under the leadership of Sukhapa (Baruah, 2013, p. 220) who reached in Brahmaputra valley after wondering to find suitable place. Finally, he settled at Choraideo in 1253 where Moran and Borahis dwelt in the region between Dikhow and Dichang rivers (Baruah, 2013, p. 222). The barbaric nature and outstanding political strategies of Ahom subjugated all the king of Bodo affinities such as Moran, Borahi, Chutiya and Kachari tribes (Gait, 1926, p. 79). Immediately, Sukhapa encourage Ahoms to marry the girls of local tribes to maintain peace and equality in the state and to strengthen the newly established political power (Gait, 1926, p.79). The process of assimilation which the Ahom had adopted to make all the local tribes into single fold was executed in the line of inter-caste marriage and subsequently the subjugated tribes were organised into a framework of material supplier as well as labour in *khats* (land) (Gurung, 2018, p. 89). Thereafter, different effective administrative measure taken by the Ahom rulers in different period which gave 600 years ruled. Among the administrative measurement the *paik* system became an extremely widespread phenomenon in medieval Assam during Ahom rule. The semi-feudal nature of Ahom administration extensively exerted the manpower through coercive parameter that resulted in active participation in ensuring peace and security as well as food production economy of the kingdom. In this respect, a distinct Ahom administration inducted the entire male person between 16 to 50 years of age into public service as well as Territorial Army. Since the *paik* embedded heterogeneous social force, for better efficiency and function *paiks* were classified as per their skill and social stratum. According to Phukan, 'the *paiks* were classified into three segments, *Kadis* (archer), *Hajuas* (builder) and *Chamuas*' (Phukan, 1973, p. 68). These squads were constituted to structure them in specific occupation. Such as, *Kadis* were primarily inducted in

military service. In the same way, *Hajuas* were employed in public work such as construction of road, bridges, embankments, houses, boat making, manufacturing weapons, collecting of salt. However, *Chamuas* enjoyed more privileges than aforementioned groups and were exempted from physical labour instead they were being engaged in other departments as well such as officers, ambassadors, clerks, messengers and accountants. Thus, *paik* system was exercised as machinery that enabled smooth conduct of the Ahom administration (Choudhury, 1987, p. 256). In course of Ahom king Subinpha, the system of assignment of men to the state officers regardless of stipend was introduced (Nath, 1960, p. 27). A strict regulation over *paik* was maintained to make perpetual way of functioning commanded by officers. It was a systematic mechanism of Ahom to engage every male person of the kingdom to avoid future eventualities. Interestingly, the entire male population was organised and put under the control of king and the two great Gohains such as Buragohain and Borgohain (Chao-Phrang-Mong-Lung and Chao-Thao-Mong-Lung) who had secured status next to the king and lived at the capital (Bhuyan, 1962, p. 8). Moreover, there were three counsellors also appointed as Barpatra Gohain, Barbarua and Barphukan for good governance (Basu, 1970, pp.103-104). However, Barbarua and Barphukan were assigned to as military commander at the time of war, who had enjoyed equal status of provincial governors (Gogoi, 2017, p. 33). According to Guha,

*“The entire paik population was divided into broad divisions under the general name of mel or dagi. One group of divisions was devoted entirely to the service of the three great ministers who could be appointed only from select clans. Another group of divisions rendered its offices to members of the royal family but were placed under the immediate control of a number of officers called Phukan, Barua and Rajkhowa”* (Guha, 2015, p.56).

Over and above, each *mel* or *dagi* embedded over 1000 to 6000 *paiks* entailed smaller number of *khel* which was further subdivided into *got* that conglomerated about three to four persons. Normally, one fourth of the members of *khel* were engaged in state service. During Ahom rule was a significant period where the *Khel* system was deeply grounded on the socio-economic life of the people because system of land holding was entrusted to them in the line of communal land holding (Guha, 2015, p. 61). In this context, one member of the *got* had to extend regular service in alternation (Guha, 2015, p. 51). Among the *paiks*, there are variation in service, the *chamuas* or rich peasants were exempted from labour service but paid a tax in cash.

To trace the genesis of *paik* system, it was Sukapa who had introduced this system in Assam with the subjugated tribal communities. Indeed, this approach was one of the reconciliatory measures of the Ahom who did not adopt treatment of war captives instead treat them equally and encouraged intermarriage as a process of assimilation and escalation of Ahomisation (Gogoi, 2014,p.314).As such, Sukapa himself married two Moran and Borahi women for maintaining social network with other communities which was very necessary to win the local support for longer administration (Guha, 1983, p. 15).As mentioned by the S.L. Baruah ‘Sukapa accepted the subdued local tribes to his social fold by providing them on equal footing with his own people and treating them as his friends’ (Baruah, 2013,p. 222).This very attitude of the Ahom from where they have immigrated to Brahmaputra Valley from Maulung established a strong reciprocal alliance with the indigenous people. Edward Gait has clearly articulated in his literary work that ‘Sukapa left his original abode in 1215 and reached to Brahmaputra valley in 1228 A. D along with eight nobles, 900 men, two elephants and 300 horses’ (Gait, 1926, p. 78). Prior to the arrival at Khamjang, he had wandered over

13 years around the Naga hills better known as Patkai hills. It would not have been viable to rule the vast kingdom with unfamiliar way of administration who had come from foreign land without organising the *paik* system (Habib, 1963, p.302). The success of over 600 years of Ahom rule in Brahmaputra Valley produced over 39 kings commencing from Chaolung Sukapha to the last king Yogeshwar Singha can be attributed to its reconciliatory and efficient diplomatic mechanism who had acknowledged various subjugated tribes under its fold for greater Ahom community. The article emphasised on the exploration of a systematic mechanism of the Ahom administration which has contributed in establishing 600 years of hegemony over almost entire Brahmaputra valley.

The political aspect of the Ahom followed a ruler who was either appointed from the council of ministers or directly inherited from the royal blood. Thus, for the smooth administrations, efficient, skilful and calibre persons were appointed to various departments. From the three council of ministers viz. Bura Gohain, Bargohain and Barpatra Gohain anyone could be appointed as Rajmantri or Prime minister. Normally, they acted as an adviser to the king in state affairs and led as a commander at war. Besides, each of them is entrusted with one lakh *paiks*. It is significant to mention that Burha Gohain was entrusted with ten thousand *paiks* along with rent free lands regardless of salary; Bar Gohain 4,000 and Barpatra Gohain, 6,000 respectively. The extension of Ahom hegemony resulted in establishment of the offices of Barbarua (head of the executive and the judiciary) and Barphukan that corresponds to the reign of Pratap Singh. These two posts were created on non-hereditary framework and their jurisdictions fall beyond the jurisdictions of the Gohains. Barbarua also controlled over 14,000 *paiks* (Rajkumar, 1980, p. 382). They served as commanders and judges. Under them six junior rank of officers (Phukans) are inducted to the council of Phukan and commanded over 5,000 *paiks* later increased to 6,000 *paiks* respectively for better organisation and efficiency. The jurisdiction of Bar Phukan conglomerated between Koliabar to Gauhati who had acted as viceroy in this mentioned area. He also handled the charge of revenue collection, administration of *paiks*, took legal charge of lower Assam, supervised over the frontiers and maintained diplomatic relation with adjacent territories such as Bhutan, Bengal and chieftains of the Assam passes (Basu, 1970, pp.108-109).

Initially, *paik* was introduced by Sukapa who had incorporated subdued tribal communities for regular supply of fuel wood, honey and drinking water. Later on, the *paik* system was systematically introduced by Momai Tamuli Barbarua under the support of Pratap Singha in 1609 AD (Lakhya, 2012, p. 23). The *paik* was organised into got that embodied four *paiks* who had to extend three months of manual service to the state, later enhanced to four months. This compulsory service to state that was executed in rotation where each member of the got was required to extend their manual work to state service (Mohan, 2017, p. 15).

### **Process of Engagement**

Prior to the apprehension of *paik* system, it would be imperative to make a comprehensive analysis on the process of their engagement into state service. In fact, king had empowered the state officers to recruit militia cum agriculturist for state revenue as well as for the defensive role. By and large, *paiks* were organised into *gots* that constitutes four members of *paik* however, from Rajeswar Singh's reign only three members of *paik* formed a *got* (Phukan, 1979, p. 52). Nirmal Kumar Basu wrote that "One man in a got had to serve the State for four months in a year and then his place was

taken by a second man from the same got and so forth” (Basu, 1970, p.113). Each squad of twenty *paiks* was commanded by Bora. Saikia commanded hundred *paiks*. Hazarika commanded a squad of thousand *paiks*. Interestingly, there was no permanent standing army during Ahom rule. It may be due to agriculture which can be rudimentary factor for dearth of regular standing army. The Ahom followed a joint or collective responsibility in dealing with state and administrative affairs. As a result, it created a semi feudal structure of administration and the process of assigning duty to adult men to state service became a responsibility of high-ranking officers who had subsequently, handed over their work to subordinate officers better known as *kheldar* who used to be senior members of *paik*. It was *kheldar* who had assigned *gamati* to the *paik*. The registration of *paik* was fixed at the age of fifteen and personal service was inducted into civil and military service to the Ahom state.

Over, 2,500 captivated soldiers were inducted into *Khel* (guild) better known as *Mariya* who were engaged to work on brass (Choudhury, 1964, p. 20). Some skilled *paiks* were identified with their profession, as such put under different officers for instance boat builders were inducted by Naosalia Phukhan, bow makers were put under the charge of Barua or Dhenu-chocha Barua (Baruah, 2013, p. 393).

In course of war and conflict, every three members of the squad was to extend military service to the state. In this context, a single member of the got was to continue as *paik* for civil purposes. A stringent function of the *paik* system disciplined each member of the *paik* to abide by rules that was devised by the authority.

However, in the context of lower Assam, land revenue system was fully grounded on Mughal system of revenue collection except the land granted by the Ahom state authority. As opined by the David Scott, ‘*khel* system was partially introduced in lower Assam’ (Scott, 1824, p. 56).

### **Role of Kheldar and Paik**

Momai-Tamuli Barbarua was a main architect of the *paik* or *khel* system who had organised them into variegated departments during the rule of Pratap Singh (Basu, 1970, p. 113). Initially, *paik* system was formed to engage in social structure. However, with the threat of Mughal invasion, a resistance force was necessitated by reorganizing *paik* into *khel* system. As articulated by S. L. Baruah, “traditional land of the kingdom belonged to this kingdom” (Baruah, 2013, p. 392). The member of *khel* belonged to the senior members of the *paik* who were mostly engaged in arrow-making, boat-building, boat plying, house-building, training and catching of elephants, superintendence of horses, training of hawks, superintendence of forests etc. there used to be consistent gradation of in charge over *paiks* such as Rajkhowa or Barua who commands over two to three thousand *paiks*, Phukan over six thousand, Hazarika over 1000, Saikia over 100. Each officer was entrusted with considerable numbers of *paiks* regardless of stipends. The *Chamuas* or higher ranks of subjects were sometimes exempted of service on payment of Rs.2. For the extension of service each *paik* was allotted two *puras* of paddy land with free of rent (Mills, 1854, p. 2). In this context, Janabi Gogoi Nath has clearly emphasized that ‘Every *paik* for his service to the state received a piece of cultivable land, and thus the *paik* system negated the number of working men who possessed no land in our period; and this fact provided every peasant almost with the minimum need for his subsistence’ (Nath, 1960, p. 123). They extended their service for a period of three months in rotation however, in later period; it was extended to four months. Apart from this, the *paik*

had to extend their service to their masters under whom they were inducted. Sometimes, they were also made to offer certain gratuities on important occasions. The *khel* also maintained control over socio-economic life. Since the king possessed absolute authority over land, the king possessed right to evacuation of the people and resettlement of people in elsewhere (Baruah, 2013, p. 392). The *Bilatiya* or *paiks* those who are engaged in private estate owned by the noble and *Dewaliyas* engaged in Satras were exempted from revenue payment and mandatory service as soldier in battle field. Apart from them, *Chamuas*, scribes, traders, artisans, Chutiya nobility and deprived Bhuyans or landlords of their rights over land were exempted from payment state service to state (Baruah, 2013, p. 394).

### **Factor:**

#### **Strict Regulation of Paik**

The Ahom had maintained stringent regulation over member of *paik*. Limited access of *paik* to trade activity had offered mild restriction over some professions of *paik*. In this context, professional *paiks* were paid tax as per their occupation (Baruah, 2013, p. 394). The induction of Barbarua in upper portion of Assam located at Ranpur and Barphukan who has been deputed at Lower Assam brought a significant and effective supervision over junior rank of officers who had maintained strict vigilance over *paiks*. At the time of war three out of four members of *paiks* in particular squad were brought to battle ground for military activity.

#### **Control of Violence**

The Ahom followed a systematic mechanism of administration to keep pace with the peaceful state of affairs. It is apparent that the entire adult men possessed dynamic enthusiastic for any course of action which can alter the position of the head of the monarchical government. Besides, joint responsibility of administrative function of the state, offered transitional authority of the Ahom ruler. Since, the Ahoms did not maintain standing and permanent army for defence (Lakhya, 2012, p. 23), voluntary militia was organised into engagement of war and defence. Since, the Ahom had established dominance over native people by its might and advanced warfare, its local subjects posed a peril to the Ahoms. Besides, rights on land ownership that was still enjoyed by the native people to live as independent or semi-independent way of life posed a serious issue for the Ahoms which subsequently forced the rulers to bring them under complete subjugation by introducing *khel* system that revised their rights which has ruled out the private ownership of land and put them under variegated squad better known as *khel* (Baruah, 2013, p. 392). As the youth and their engagement into service remained an inevitable act of the Ahom state which can be argued that all the youth need to be engaged for maintaining peace and security of the state. So as to achieve peaceful administration, the entire male person was inducted in *paik* system. The engagement of the *paik* in civil and military sector limited a kingdom's provocative conflict that is harmful for the peaceful affairs of the state.

#### **Reduction of Military Expenses**

The widespread utilization of power structured on *paik* system de-escalated the heavy burden of high military expenses. Besides, the Ahom did not maintain permanent standing army. The form of security measure structured on *paik* system directly involved the *paiks* in land acquisition as stipend

for their compulsory service to the state. The decentralised system of administration corresponding to military obligation of Akbar's *Mansabdari* system that was structured on dual ranks of *zat* (cavalrymen) and *sawar* (horsemen) was introduced in second half of Akbar's rule. So as to eliminate dishonesty of the nobles and to regulate the military evasions such organisation was instituted (Gommans & Kollf, 2001, p. 250). Since, there was limited access to free trade activities with the neighbouring states that literally centred the economy of the kingdom in state service as well as agriculture. Dependent upon agriculture offered limited economic support to the administration which remained a fundamental cause for the engagement of the people to reduce a military expense. In a similar pattern, all the noble birth and high-ranking officers were allotted vast tracts of land in lieu of stipend and were being exempted from payment of revenue. However, noble and high-handed officials were entrusted with management of *paiks* in return these *paiks* offered their labour in land for agriculture and served as defence at the time of war and conflict. Thus, non-payment of cash stipend eventually facilitated saving of state exchequer where state should have borne a huge liability to the military expenses.

### **Eradication of Unemployment**

As the ultimate power lies in youth that contribute military and civil work to the state. In the same way, the Ahom kings had systematically framed a set of socio-political cum economic organisation to engage all the adult between the age of 15 to 50 where dynamic energy and high spirit of endeavour prevail. Contradictorily, there was no mentioned of women members of *paiks*. When an unemployment rate augments, demand for employment comes to surface. Reference can be mentioned by bringing civil wars of France and America where unemployment rate had soared, subsequently people turned against the king as a result of non-engagement of the youth into service. A systematic machinery of the Ahom could manage to engage all the adult into state service in the process of *paik* system which had allotted *gomati* (two *puras* of land assigned to *paik*) as per the availability of vast tracts of fertile land. Besides, low demography of the Ahom also consolidated easy access to cultivable land. The *gomati* land was given as stipend to the member of *paiks* which is non-transferable and non-heritable. This particular land and its validity remained so long as the *paik's* service to state.

As observed by Guha, land sale was not extensively practised during Ahom period due to dearth of money economy. As a result, *paik* could only mortgage the *gamati* and only few land sales were executed in Kamrup district (Guha, 2015, p. 630). During medieval period of Ahom, there was hardly any specialization and urban centre as compared to other counterparts of contemporary kingdom of mainland India. In fact, natural economy embodied the main source of the medieval Assamese society.

### **Revenue Generation**

Undoubtedly, the Ahoms appropriated the private property in their possession (Baruah, 2013, p. 391). *Paik* system was a unique institution of Ahom administration which was designed to engage member of the *paik* with a purpose of generating resources of land and human labour. The collection of revenue in form of labour remained the Tais of South East Asia. As such same pattern of revenue generation was found in the Nan-chao kingdom of old (Wood, 1933, p. 85). The report of the Judicial and Revenue Administration of Assam, clearly brings to light the revenue generation of the

Ahom embodied personal service, production of land and cash (Report on the Judicial and Revenue Administration of Assam, 1839, p. 121). The vast tracts of fertile land remained unutilized which can be looked upon as non-generating resources. A farsighted member of the Ahom clearly observed the economy and livelihood of the people living in Brahmaputra valley that resulted in organizing of people based of *paik* system that would supply perpetual revenue to the state. The *paiks* extended their service in civil and military service of the Ahom state. The exaction of state's revenue in the form of labour constituted one of the significant aspects of the Tais' of South-East Asia (Phukan, 1973, p. 67). However, in contradictory pattern, cash realization of tax from *paik* was found in the case of *chamua* who paid half revenue to the authority as compared to the ordinary *paiks* who paid Rs.3. This collection of tax from *chamua paik* was introduced during the time of Pratap Singha in 1603-1641 A. D (Bhuyan, 1960, p. 136). Similarly, people were looked upon as property of the state.

### **Disintegration of Indigenous Ethnic Groups**

The advance mode of production changed the primitive mode of production that depended on shifting agriculture. The social structure of native people was eliminated by the new system of engagement. Because, most of the ethnic groups were attached to land for cultivation. However, free access to land was stripped off from the common people instead put them under the system of *paik* that limited marginal proportion of land holding. Indeed, traditional right of the people over land was the only source of livelihood but the intention of the Ahom which was to put local people under absolute suppression shattered preceding social structure and introduced conventional mechanism that could be easily availed by the Ahom authority. The farsighted Ahom intellect and enforcement gradually disintegrated private ownership of land that was one of the structures of the society.

### **Expansion of Cultivable Land**

The advent of Ahom into Brahmaputra valley changed the course of human settlement with intensive cultivation. The previous practice of agriculture associated with shifting cultivation which was one of the primitive modes of tribal origin of cultivation gradually came under the pressure of change. The Ahom kings advocated the expansion of agriculture by adopting plough-based mode of production that apparently encouraged the practice of settled agriculture (Guha, 2015, p. 51). It is also emphasized by Lahiri, "The Ahoms played a significant role in widening the base of wet-rice culture of the *Sali* variety in the extensive and undulating plains of eastern Assam and also transferred their wet rice technology to less advanced tribes" (Lahiri, 1984, p. 60). The vast fertile land with less density of population offered resource utilization on land. In the process of land utilization more *paiks* were engaged into uncultivated land so as to bring them under cultivation by offering certain portions of land to *paiks* which could be termed as remittance for their service to state and paid in the form of remuneration. On the other hand, the practice of land grants was another indirect encouragement of intensive cultivation that privileged the high-ranking officers, nobles, priests and religious institutions who had received vast tracts of land. With more territorial expansion demographic pattern has changed which demanded more land for cultivation that could meet revenue demand as well as sustainable livelihood. As a result, an active participation of *paik* in agricultural operation shaped the economic development and expansion of agricultural operation by clearing the forest and virgin lands. The intensive practice of agriculture gradually changed the society as well as land settlement pattern of Brahmaputra Valley.

## **Economic Stability**

In course of the Ahom hegemony, the Assam possessed self-sufficiency rural economy depending mostly upon agriculture. With regard to the backbone of the Ahom economy Jogen Nath Phukan, “The *khel* served as the economic foundation of the Ahom state. Self-sufficient village economy was facilitated by the intensive cultivation of agriculture and diplomatic nexus established with adjacent principalities and chieftains. Agriculture formed a formidable economy of the Ahom kingdom. The war against the native kings offered ample land to the Ahom kings. Since, Assam plain possessed fertile land which is contributed by Brahmaputra River and its tributary rivers. In fact, it may not be appropriate to draw a conclusion that only trade facilitated a strong foundation of the Ahom kingdom but it was intensive cultivation which was a part of the Ahom who has been engaging into agriculture that promoted surplus economy and empowered the king economically. The intensive food production was sufficient enough to support the royal family as well as the common people of the kingdom. An adequate food security had kept people of the Ahom into satisfaction. The participation of *paiks* in agricultural activities resulted in economic progress that ensured economic security to the kingdom.

## **Disintegration of Paik System**

Since the Moamorian rebellion the Ahom had faced an internal disturbance. The Moamoria (Maran) rebellion led by Barsenapati or one chief mainly worshipper of Vishnu inflicted overwhelming devastation to the mighty supremacy of the Ahom (Neufville, 1828, p. 334). Subsequently, the Burmese aggression severely ripped off a peaceful and powerful Ahom supremacy in Assam. Furthermore, the Burmese aggression eventually induced the British into the territory of Assam who had driven them out of North East India. In due course the British took a complete advantage of the fragile condition of the Ahom power shattered by the Burmese soldiers and the process of reorganisation was executed that rolled out a new administration that replaced an old system of administration. Following the political takeover of Assam, the British liquidated a legacy of Ahom administration especially the *paik* system where all the civil and military activities were being conducted by the *paiks* under the direction of the Ahom kings and high-ranking officers, specially *Satgharia* or blue noble birth (Goswami, 2012, p. 23). Undoubtedly, *paiks* were treated as semi-bonded labourers tied to land and defence who had to extend their labour to the state without any cash regardless of remuneration. In fact, over the years *paik* system remained a chief source of state's income and security to the state. However, the British had annihilated this system and voluntary state labour were freed from the confinement of compulsory state service and returned to their respective home to turn as free cultivators. In this context, Goswami has clearly stressed on the intention of the British's how they systematically shifted their course of action, “commercial motive gradually began to develop political overtones” (Goswami, 2012, p. 22). Indeed, the very objective of the British advent to India was trade and commerce but in the context of Assam they were called by the authority for military assistance for retaining the throne. In the life of the *paik* gradually came a turning point that can be attributed to Burmese atrocities and dominance of British over the inhabitants of Assam.

## **Conclusion**

The *paik* system was the main backbone of the Ahom who could systematically engage the entire young men into services and fully utilized the human resources from economic, military and social purposes. The devoid of centralized administration and permanent standing army substituted the *paik* system who were grounded on military and labour purposes. On the other hand, perpetual peace and prosperity during Ahom period prevailed on account of unique set of administration that could be attributed to *paik* system. Personal liberty, private ownership of land and free trade were stripped off from the *paiks*. Material conditions and way of life of the people was determined by the state. Sometimes, some *paiks* bought their freedom from personal service to state through bribery to their officers under whom they have to service. The institutionalized system of paying money to officers to escape state service created a new social class that are economically determined as affluence class of *paiks* who were privileged with greater freedom. Indeed, strict enforcement of this system systematically brought under peaceful administration and success of 600 years of Ahom rule. Before the British reorganisation of Assam in socio-economic and political structures, the Burmese had exhaustively annihilated the Ahom state that resulted in *Manar Din* (black day). Thus, feasibility of abolition in *paik* system was easily executed at the time of British dominion over Assam.

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