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## A STUDY OF TOWNS, TRADE AND TAXATION SYSTEM IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM

<sup>1</sup>*Ebrahim Ali Mondal, Assistant Professor of History ,*

B.N. College, Dhubri Assam, India  
E-mail: ebrahimalimondal@gmail.com

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper an attempt has been made 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 modeling, 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 custom houses, 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 epigraphically records, coins, inscriptions, literary sources, travellers account as well as secondary works.

### **1. Introduction :**

The present study 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 done worked

on the economic history of Assam but touched few aspects on trade, towns and taxation system in medieval Assam. Therefore, an attempt has been made 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 to a great extent determined the economy of Assam. The Ahom kings introduced different *khel* such as *sonowal khel*, *moriya khel*, *kalita khel*, *sonari khel*, *potiya khel*, *katani khel*, *duliya khel*, *sonsowakhel*, *kamar khel*, *kumar khel*, *kukura pohiya 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 organized 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 usual matter.<sup>2</sup> The Ahom kings were then 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 excellent 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>

## **2. Method and Materials:**

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

## **3. Discussion**

The Ahom kings built their capital towns in such places which were excellent from the point of protection and security. The kings, nobilities, lived with their families in towns. The towns naturally attracted various professional groups such builders, artisans, craftsmen, manufacturers, traders and others they greatly contributed development of new urban centre's as well as enhanced economic prosperity of Assam. These towns were humming with activities during the period of being the seats of royal residences. These capital assumed political importance for ascertain period of the history and relapsed in to 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 made in systematic order. The kings established many highly educated persons, artist, traders and others professional community. There were thick habitants

and a narrow market road on the both banks of Dikhu river. Shihabuddin Talish noticed a bazar at Garhgaon in A.D. 1660. The traders of the hat or market were only the betel-nut sellers, who used to sit beside an arrow road.<sup>5</sup> Outside the palace, neat and pure mansion has been built for the residence of the king and the nobles have built very nice and strong houses near the royal palace. Mention may be made the Garhgaon was the real capital town of Assam and Rangpur was military centre.<sup>6</sup> Gadadhar Singha built a town at Barkola and it was 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 18th 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 about a town at Meteka known as Rangpur and fort at Teji which were built by Rudra Singha. Then he 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 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 is bounded by the Desoi river in the east, Dhuli on the west, Kuntia-pota 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 Tamradhvaja, the Kachari king and Rama Simha, the Jayantia king took oath of allegiance to Rudra Singha here. Trade was 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 built their capitals because of its strategic position.<sup>13</sup> It is covered by hills both 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 would give commodities like salt, sculpture and other products in exchanged for gold, pepper, silk cloth and aloe wood.<sup>15</sup> Trade was 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, Hakim-hat, 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 Hatkhawas 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 toll gates were established 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 controlled by an officer titled UjirBarua 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>19</sup> Bisnupur was famous for disposal of valuable woods and traders from Pabna, Mymensingh, Kumilla, Dhaka, Rangpur came here for purchasing woods. 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 produced 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 basically 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> Lakharpura 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 organized on account socio-religious festivals. Imports and exports continued for many days together in this fair.<sup>26</sup> 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 common commercial commodities. Nagaon during the reign of Rudra Singha every man was required to plant bamboo and betel-nut tree and was to make baskets of bamboo.<sup>27</sup> Kaliabar was 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 point situated very 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. 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. Pratap Singha established two markets at Dopdarand Borhat to encourage exchange of goods with the Nagas. Nariya Raja in his short reign even set up hat in order to trade with Kacharis. Gadadhar Singha set up two markets called Chakihat and 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 encouraged extensive trade with foreign countries especially with Tibet. The markets were made in order to meet the growing demand of regional trade, where permanent, weekly, periodical markets were organized. Besides these the Ahom kings established markesat 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. Markets were established at the foot hills 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 north-east. 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. With the increase in population many other internal markets rose up in order to meet the requirements of the people. 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> Though these were perhaps trading place of distinct places or tribes but traders of others places also allowed to import and export of commodities.

#### **4. Taxation System :-**

The tax collector known as Hatkhowa Barua was appointed by the kings in order to collect tax on different commodities.<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 naturally worked as trade centres between the people of plains and the hill tribes. Taxes and tributes for different commodities were released 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. 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, Hatyamukh, Sonapurand, 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 phatsin 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 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 this places for commercial purpose, where they sold and purchased various necessary commodities.<sup>36</sup>

## **5. Results :-**

The Ahom administrative system made remarkable contribution towards the growth and development of towns and craft industries in Assam. The khels were organized 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 good location which were excellent 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 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 this constituted the security of the kingdom from the invasion of the outsiders.

## **6. Conclusion and Findings :**

In short it can be said that towns were not only seat of royal activities but these also important trade centre. 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 utilized

properly. Most of the Ahom monarchs seem to have adopted policy of isolation and forbade outsiders to enter and did not allow them to settle in Assam for the purpose of security. In fact the people of Assam also did not allow leaving country and settling 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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