

Economic Condition of Assam in Medieval Period: With Special Reference to Kamrup

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Abstract: The chronicles of the Ahom Kingdom and the *Rajyamsavali* of the Koch do not contain much direct information on the economic condition of Assam. However, they bear indications as to the condition of the people and their status vis-a vis the state and the land settlement system. These help us to draw certain conclusions about the prevailing economic condition of the different strata of the inhabitants. In this respect the inscriptions of the period serve as invaluable source for information on the economic history of Assam more particularly that of Kamrup. Despite the fact that most of the inscriptions are primarily donation documents, they also record contemporary information relating to agriculture and agricultural products, land divisions, unit and lineal measurement of land, units of weight and measurement, land disputes, land revenue, medium of exchange, various taxes and ownership of land.

This paper tries to study the above mentioned parameters of economic condition of ancient Assam. The source materials have been collected from books, articles and inscriptions and various other available sources.

Keywords: Economic Condition of Assam, land divisions, medium of exchange.

1. INTRODUCTION

The chronicles of the Ahom Kingdom and the *Rajyamsavali* of the Koch do not contain much direct information on the economic condition of Assam. However, they bear indications as to the condition of the people and their status vis-à-vis the state and the land settlement system. These help us to draw certain conclusions about the prevailing economic condition of the different strata of the inhabitants¹. In this respect the inscriptions of the period serve as invaluable source for information on the economic history of Assam more particularly that of Kamrup. *In many literature, Assam was also referred to as Kamrup*. Despite the fact that most of the inscriptions are primarily donation documents, they also record contemporary information relating to agriculture and agricultural products, land divisions, unit and lineal measurement of land, price of commodities, units of weight and measurement, land disputes, land revenue, medium of exchange, various taxes and ownership of land.²

2. AGRICULTURE

As elsewhere agriculture was the mainstay of the people of Assam. Both in the plains as well as in the hills, rice constituted the staple food in Assam. The Assamese people high and low from the humble peasant to the members of the royal blood were engaged in agricultural pursuits. Hardly was there a family that was not engaged in the culture of land. Even the artisans and craftsmen carried on agriculture in addition to their time-honoured pursuits.³ The people of Assam were primarily dependent on agriculture for their sustenance.⁴ That agriculture was basic to the whole economy in the medieval time is evident from the varieties of crops raised and from the names of different categories of land under paddy cultivation.⁵ In Kamrup, Ahom kings granted numerous lands to different sections of people for cultivation.⁶ Land grants record several categories of lands for the cultivation of rice and crops such as *Baotali*⁷ (land for a variety of deep water paddy called *Bao*), *Bengenatali*⁸ (land used or fit for brinjal cultivation) and *Kathiaitali*⁹ (land for raising *Sali* seedling).

In Kamrup, the cultivation of paddy was carried on both in the rainy and the dry seasons.¹⁰ The usual variety of paddy cultivated in rainy season was called *Sali*¹¹ and was transplanted. The *Sali* rice was sown in June and transplanted in July

and August were reaped in December and January.¹² Another variety of paddy grown in the rainy season was called *Bao*. The *Bao* was cultivated in a comparatively low-land that remained under water¹³ and was sown during February and March and were reaped in June and July.¹⁴ The variety cultivated in the dry season was called *Ahu*. It was sown during January and February, and was reaped in May and June.¹⁵

The other crops raised included (a) *Makoi Joha* sown in February and March were reaped in May and June, (b) mustard (*Sinapis dichotoma*) seeds were sown during October and November and were gathered in January and February. There were two varieties of mustard seeds viz, white and red. Several varieties of pulse such as *Mati Mah* (*Phaseolus Max*), *Mogu Mah* (*Phaseolus Mung*), *Kala Mah* (*Lattyrus Sativa*) *Barkala Mah* (*Pisum Sativum*) and *Machur Mah* (*Ervum Lens*) were commonly cultivated in land which had been normally above the flood level. Besides these, the cultivation of *Rahar* and other varieties of pulse and beans such as *Lechera Mah* (*Delichos sinesis*), *Beji Mah*, *Garro Mah*, and *Urahi* (*Lablab cultratum*) were done in Kamrup. The pulses were sown in the months of September and October and harvested in the month of December. Sugarcane was planted in April and was collected in the months of January and February.¹⁶

The agricultural implements used in Kamrup were simple that included plough (*nangal*) drawn usually by a pair of bullock, hoe (*kor*), yoke (*jangli*), sickle (*kachhi*), a bamboo harrow (*mai*), clod, breaker (*dalimariya*) and rake (*jabaka*).¹⁷

3. CLASSIFICATION OF LAND

The land-grant documents of our period the 17th and 18th centuries provide us with a fairly complete picture of the different classes of land in Kamrup.¹⁸ The land system of Kamrupa was important for the reason that it was the last limit of the Mughal system towards the east and also the last limit of the Ahom territorial expansion towards the west.

About nineteen types of classification of land are recorded in the land grant charters of the Ahom rulers.¹⁹ These are as follows-

1. Rupit /Rowati, 2. Pharingati, 3. Kathiatoli, 4. Baotoli, 5. Bengenatol, 6. Bari or Bhithi, 7. Habi, 8. Doloni, and 9. Bil

There was another class of land called *Aja-jangala*²⁰ or *Hacila-jangala*²¹ which stand for reserved forestland not suitable for paddy cultivation. This type of land was used for the purpose of wood, firewood or for collection of wild medicinal plants. For example in one land-grant copperplate inscription during Siva Singha it is mentioned that the *aja jangala* land measuring 14 *pura* in Tuhara Village in Konwarbhag Pubpar Paragana was given to Brahmin Lakhpati.²²

From the above references to different classes of land it is clear that during the 18th century in Kamrup lands were classified on the basis of their different agricultural or otherwise use. The medieval inscriptions generally contain references to these classes of arable and unarable lands significantly the maximum quantity of land granted through the royal charters falls under the category *Bari or Bhithi*. It appears that *Bari mati* in Kamrup was available than the other types of lands. *Rupit mati* was put under extensive cultivation as Kamrup had already a commercial economy both winter and rainy season. From the religious point of view grant of such land was essential for constructing *temple* and building *satras*. The increasing number classification of land indicates that land was already becoming less abundance.

Ownership of land:

In ancient Kamrup, as B.K Barua²³ observes, the sovereign was considered as the sole owner of the land. But according to P. C. Choudhury the royal claim to ownership of lands had no effect on the peasants who paid their dues to the state, who thus became the real owner of the lands.²⁴ Thus, as in northern India the ownership of land by the sovereigns in ancient Assam was found to be theoretical. In ancient Assam the kings very often transferred their rights over lands by making donations of lands, which were exempted from all taxes²⁵. But in case of the Ahom rulers, a difference is noticed. The Ahom rulers not only granted lands to the individuals and institutions, but also transferred their rights to the donees to collect all levies to be realised from donated lands. The usual form, as found in land grants of the Ahom period was "all claims (of the state) over such lands are here by given up by the phrase- *sarbba bab parityag haila*. For instance the copper plate inscription recording settlement of land in Bausi Paragana. By this charter in 1816 A.D. king Chandrakanta Singha appointed Atiram to both as *Chaudhury* and *Patowari* of the Bausi Paragana against an annual payment of Rs 1300. It was represented to the king through the channel of the Buragohain, the prime minister, that the forefathers of Atiram had been *Chaudhury* of the said *paragana* since the occupation of the country by the Bangal (Mughal) and that there were a few *Chaudhury* from other families in the mean time. Atiram produced proof of records (*mahzar*) written in Persian to support his contention. The *Svargadeva* was satisfied that his was a genuine and reinstated Atiram in the old

inheritance²⁶. From this instance, it can be seen, that the system was already in existence in Kamrup before the Ahoms. The Ahom rulers allowed the age- old system to continue and thereby recognised it. The rights of the state over such lands were usually remained relinquished. But in case of disputes over such lands that arose due to illegal occupation of lands it was the state that possessed the inherent right to settle all such disputes Thus in other spheres the royal ownership was found to be nominal and did not normally extend beyond their over all control²⁷.

Writing in 1870, W.W Hunter stated that although a few people were found in Kamrup who did not possess land, but served as labourer, these men were principally employed in cultivating the lands of others, and were paid either in money or by a share of crop.²⁸ In the latter case they were called *marakia*, and were generally reimbursed for their manual labour by a one fourth share of the crop, employer financing the seed and the necessary agricultural implements.²⁹ Husbandmen sometimes sublet their farms to persons who did not hold any land of their own. Such tenure was called *adhi*; the owners of the land bind themselves to paid the government revenue, and also something in kinds to the sub-tenants on account of transplanting and other expenses. In return, he received half of the produce of the land without supplying either seed or cattle.³⁰

4. REVENUE SYSTEM

Land grant inscriptions as well as *Perakakat* supply us with the sources of revenue of Assam under the Ahom. In the upper portion of the Ahom kingdom land revenue was absent nor were the officers paid in cash.³¹ All the officers of the government were provided with rent-free land and the services of *paiks* according to ranks.³² On the basis of service of the peasant- paiks to the state in war and peace, each *paik* received two *pura* or approximately 2.66 acres of rent free land for agricultural purposes (*rupit* land) called *gamati* (Body Land),³³ in addition to a piece of land for homestead. As the *paiks* supplied the government and chief officials all their necessities free of cost, naturally there was little need for a money tax.³⁴

The revenue administration in Kamrup was different from that of other parts of Assam, as because it was occupied by the Mughals before the coming of the Ahoms. When this part came under Ahom administration the basic structure of the Mughal type of administration was retained while Ahom rule and officers were foisted upon the territory. We thus get Baruas, Barkayasthas, Chaudhury, Thakuriya in Kamrup. The tributary Darrangi-Raja had Hazarika, Saikiya, Bara and Buruk while the Raja, Rajputras and Chahariyas constituted the superior authority there. Some of the small principalities within the Ahom state had their own gradation of authority- Raja, Cahariya, Majindar(Majumdar) Hazarika, Thakuriya and Laskar. In Kamrup revenue was collected on the basis of *Paragana*, introduced earlier by the Muhammedans.³⁵

A study of the Ahom land-grants throws a flood of light of the land revenue system in Kamrup. The inscriptions generally refer to land revenue as well as to a number of levies realised on different accounts, but the nature of such levies has not been explained by the grants themselves, and different writers have given their own opinions in respect of the said state levies. Of these, *kar* stands for actual revenue realised from lands.³⁶

During the time of Mughal administration Ibrahim Krori made rules for the *paiks*.Rs.5 was fixed as *ga-dhan* (tax in lieu of physical service to the state) for each quarter *paik*. If this could not be paid in cash, shawls (*parchara*) could be accepted in its place. There was no *katal* (revenue) for homestead or orchard land. In the case of cultivable land, the revenue for one *pura* for each year was 1½ or 2 or 3 annas in different *paraganas*. If some one enjoyed forest land out side of the *jokha* (*jama*, surveyed land), no revenue assessment was made on it. The Ahoms also retained the same.³⁷

On the eve of the British annexation, Chandrakanta Singha imposed a new tax called *Kharikatana* on bari and bari lands which so long remained rent-free. Throughout the country a poll tax variously named house tax in Kamrup or *Kharikatana* in Nagaon, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, body or poll tax (*ga-dhan*) was levied.³⁸ This tax was introduced in Kamrup during the time of the Burmese occupation (1821-24), on the number of plough at rupee one per plough.³⁹

A considerable amount of revenue seems to have been collected from the *Duars*, or custom houses in Kamrup and Darrang district. These Duars were normally the properties of the Ahom rulers, but during the reign of Jayadhvaj Singha (1648- 63A.D.) the Ahoms had to hand over these Duars to Bhutanese King in consideration of an annual tribute, consisting of yak tail, ponies, musk, gold-dust, blankets, daggers, the value of which was estimated Rs 4785/11.⁴⁰ Besides the Raja of Bhutan, during the reign of Kamaleswar Singha, used to supply a number of valuable articles like silver pot, having golden design thereon, different kinds of clothes, dresses and other wearing apparels, rugs, blankets and yak tails along with some horses, cows and ponies.⁴¹ There was also a custom post at Solal Phat (trade out post of Solal) on the

bank of the Brahmaputra river where duties were collected on all goods passing between Kamrup and Assam proper and the total revenue derived from it amounted to Rs 5000 a year.⁴²

The Raja of *Rani* paid an annual tribute and this office was hereditary, but he was liable to be dismissed for misconduct. The Raja of Rani Duar was bound to furnish the king with 621 paiks and gave presents annually to the value of Rs 5000. The Raja was given five percent commission and was required to furnish the Ahom king and some other superior officers with some presents.⁴³

Land Division:

Kamrup was called a *desh*, and it was divided into twenty-six *paragana* each under a *Chaudhury*, who received a certain amount of the land under his management as remuneration.⁴⁴ Different land-grants of Ahom kings record the name of most of the paraganas. These were Bagaribari, Bajali, Banbhag, Banshar, Bangesvar, Barnagar, and Barbansar. Barhantimohal, Barpeta, Bausi, Chamariya, Chayaniya, Dehar, Kachari Mohal, Khata, Komarbhad, Kshetri, Madanmohal, Nambarbhag, Pachimpar, Patbausi, Pati Darrang, Pubpar, Sarubansar, Sarukshetri, and Upar Barbhag.⁴⁵

A *paragana* was sub-divided into several *taluks*, such as Arangmau, Bahirhkhata, Bhitarkhata, Bilesvara, Daladi, Dadhi, Dehan, Dehijan, Haligaon, Hasang, Khata, Khana, Majali, Namkhata, Orara, Panigaon, and Suradi.⁴⁶ A *taluk* consisted with a few villages, which were the lowest unit.⁴⁷

Each *taluk* was in the charge of a *Talukdar* under the *Chaudhury* and were paid in land. The *Chaudhury* and *Talukdar* were assisted by *Thakuria* and *Patowary* as subordinate revenue accountants. The *paragana* system was retained by the Ahom till British occupation of Kamrup in 1824.

Measurement of Land:

Land-grant inscriptions bear reliable information about units of land measurement, prevailing during the period.

In land measurement the largest unit was the *pura*, which is equal to 57600sq. ft. or 1.32 acre (approx). It is derived from *putaka*, a Sanskrit term that appears in the inscriptions of Kesavarai Visnu temple of Rudra Singha of *saka* 1662' and the Hayagriva-Madhava inscription of Pramatta Singha of *saka* 1677⁴⁸

Next lower unit is *bigha*⁴⁹ equal to 14400 sqft. A *bigha* was comprised of five *kathas* and lowest unit is *lecha*, which is equal to 144sq.ft.

For measuring land, a pole (*danda*) of *sardha-sapta-hasta-pramana*⁵⁰ (seven cubits and a half) or 4.20 cm. was used as recorded in the copper plate inscriptions of Siva Singha in *saka* 1639, 1646 and Gaurinath Singha of *saka* 1771.⁵¹ This is the old measuring rod, which was usually seven cubits and a half in length. In some parts a rod of seven cubits only (*sat-hatiya-tar*) or 392 cm. was also used as mentioned in the copper plate inscription of Kamaleswar Singha of *saka* 1727 in connection with the Bardowa Satra dispute⁵²

Weight and Measure:

As regards weight of food materials, the copper-plate inscriptions of Rajesvar Singha of *saka* 1675⁵³ and of Kamaleswar Singha of *saka* 1727⁵⁴ record the weight of paddy; rice and similar articles in *maund* (= 37.32 kg.), *seer* (= 0.933 kg.) *chataka* (=1/16 *seer* = 0.933 kg. = 0.058 Kg./ 16) .

The next higher unit was *katha*, which is *approximately* 250 grams. The highest unit was *don*, a unit of 5 *kathas*. Fruits and other such articles were counted in numbers such as 1 *kada* comprising of four (4) in number.⁵⁵ The next higher unit was *ganda*, (unit of sixteen) such as *tamol Iganda* (sixteen numbers of arecanut) and the highest unit was *pon*, eighty (80) in number was used in medieval Assam.⁵⁶

Betel-vine leaves were counted in terms of *guci* or small packet comprising twenty leaves (*pan/guchi*) as recorded in the inscription of *saka* 1727.⁵⁷ The ten such packets were put in a bundle called *mutha*, Fish, milk etc. were often expressed in terms of shoulder-load (*bhar*) i.e. *gakhir 2 bhar* = two shoulder loads of milk. Milk also weighted in term of container, or pot (*kalah/ tekeli*) such as *ekalah gakhir* (a vessel- full of milk), *chunga dai* (a bamboo cylinder full of curd).⁵⁸

For measuring gold, silver, and copper *tola*, (80 *rati* or 146.4 grains) i.e., eighty *rati* in weight, *anna* (6 *rati*) and *rati* (1.825 grains or .119 grammes in weight were used). The standard of weight and measurement of the commodities in the Ahom regime varied, according to the nature and size of the goods.⁵⁹

Sources of Revenue:

A good number of taxes were recorded in the inscription of the Ahom Kings although they are silent on the matter of the rates of these taxes. They were: -

Kar: Land revenue, a tax, revenue, rent, toll, and tribute, payable to a king or priest.⁶⁰

Katal: During the Ahom rule artisans paid a higher rate of poll tax amounting to five rupees per adult head in the case of goldsmith and brass workers, and three rupees in the case of oil pressers and fishermen. The tax was called *Katal*.⁶¹

Pad: Tax paid by Chamua Paiks for being raised to the status in cash or kind.⁶²

Jalkar: The tax on water (*jalkara*) was not imposed for supplying drinking water but for fishing in rivers and tanks. This tax had also the approval of the ancient lawgivers.⁶³ Tax imposed for catching fish on rivers and tanks.

Begar: The responsibility to render physical labour on requisition from the state. In ancient India the forced labour enforced by the state was called visit (*batakarena akrsta karmakah*), and this type of enforced labour in medieval Assam was called *begar*.⁶⁴

Dana: Tax levied on material for sale, to levy duty from a trader.⁶⁵

Khut: Revenue imposed on miscellaneous articles (e.g. muga, silk) other than lands.⁶⁶

Pancaka: In addition to revenue and taxes noted above, other sources of receipts were taxes paid by persons on being raised to the status of *chamuwa*, or an officer's contribution made to the state special occasions (*pancaka*), monetary punishment (*artha danda*), and such other sources of revenue.⁶⁷

Beth: The responsibility of catching wild elephant, and buffalo for the state.⁶⁸

Danda: Punishment and fines for miscellaneous crimes and offences.⁶⁹

Yavaksara: Duty to supply netre or saltpetre needed in manufacturing gunpowder.⁷⁰

Chor: Fines for petty theft or pilferage.⁷¹

Dhumuchi: The confiscation of property, which could not be inherited by anybody, to the state; the tax *dhumuchi* was escheat which the *Dharmasastra* recommended.⁷²

Marecha: Tax for using land for *homa* in a marriage⁷³

Dana: Sale tax, tax for ferrying over rivers, etc.⁷⁴

Bandha: Binding down on account of crimes.⁷⁵

Hat: Tax on buying and selling in a market.⁷⁶

Ghat: Tax collected on ferry crossing.⁷⁷

Chaki, phat and Ghat: The tax levied on goods (*Sulka*) as well as on persons at outposts, the custom duty imposed on markets and taxes on ferrying across rivers were respectively known as *Chaki*, *Phat* and *Ghat*.⁷⁸

It may be noted that all these taxes mentioned in the inscriptions were not actually imposed or prevailed in the Ahom period. The long list of taxes was entered because they should cover all traditional taxes. Hence some of these were only in name, which had come down from earlier times.

5. INDUSTRIES

Of the industries brick making was an ancient industry. The industry received greater attention and assumed importance since the beginning of the eighteenth century when bricks were widely used in the construction of innumerable temples, palaces and tombs, which are now seen at many places in Assam.⁷⁹ In Kamrup, temples, tanks and gates were built by bricks. The Rudresvara temple, Navagraha tank etc. and several ramparts were made of brick.⁸⁰ The brick industry was kept under state control and there is no evidence of brick structure owned by other persons during that period.⁸¹

Gold, Copper and Silver Smithy:

Gold-smithy thrived chiefly under the royal patronage. King Pratap Singha imported gold-smiths from Koch Behar, and about a hundred years later Rudra Singha brought goldsmiths from Benaras who introduced new techniques and designs.⁸² Thus, the gold smithy developed in Assam under the royal patronage of the Ahom kings. However the profession was confined to a limited number of people, as the wearing of gold ornaments was limited to the royal and aristocratic families.⁸³

Copper:

Articles made of copper such as pots, plates spoons were mainly used for religious purposes.⁸⁴ During the Ahom rule, in Kamrup most of the land- grant was engraved on copper. Buchanon Hamilton refers that the copper used in various purposes by the Ahoms were brought from Bengal⁸⁵ but neither statistics nor any reference is available to us. Similarly use of silver was also restricted.

Weaving:

All classes of people irrespective of caste and creed of Kamrup practised spinning yarn and weaving clothes. In fact, every Assamese family was a weaver (*tati*). Early Assamese writers like Madhava Kandali (14th century) had occasionally mentioned the *Tanti* (weaver) in their writings, but the *Tantis* mentioned by them in most cases meant only the silk weaver. In Kamrup there were some villages inhabited only by professional weavers.⁸⁶ These specialised classes were settled at certain localities such as Tantikuchi (near modern Barpeta), Hajo, and Suwalkuchi, which grew as silk manufacturing centres.⁸⁷ The traditional profession continued to be followed in Kamrup during the Ahom rule and the Ahoms did not interfere in it. The elaborately dressed persons appearing in some illustrated manuscripts and on temple walls represented those of the officials priests and royalty whose demand for cloth was mainly catered by professional weavers like the Tantis, Katanis and Jolahs. Gunabhiram Barua mentioned the two terms in respect of Tantis i.e. the Yugi (Jugi) and Katani.⁸⁸ During the Ahom rule, some of the Tantis were appointed as disciple of the *Satras*.⁸⁹

Wooden Works:

Wooden articles used by the people in general were simple both in type and design, which did not require specialised training tools and technology. In Kamrup the wood-workers, called Badai (carpenter) or Sutar mostly working in functional guilds, produced fine and artistic articles either for religious institutions or the state. Under royal patronage, the wood-workers attained considerable skill and excellence and produced varieties of articles for the use of the nobility, the court and the members of the royal family and also articles of presents to foreign courts and ambassadors.⁹⁰ The *Satra* institutions were the main centres of woodcrafts during the medieval period.

Bell metal:

Inscriptions also proved existence off bell-metal works. The bell-metal workers are known as Kahar. In Kamrup two main centres were Sarthebari and Hajo. The utensils of bell-metal were dishes, plates, bowls and articles of common use. The Ahom king assigned bell-metal workers (Kahar) to temples for the supply of bell-metal articles.⁹¹

Pottery Making:

Pottery making is an ancient art. This was carried out by the Kumars and the Hiras,⁹² the former used the wheels and the latter made pot by hand. Inscriptions refer to the grant of potters such as Ramananda Kumar, Kumar Kalita, Jadu Hira, Keho Hira. These two professional classes were engaged in the industry and also to the religious institutions.⁹³ The articles of common use made by potters were cooking vessels (*charu*), cups of different sizes (*mola*), small pots (*tekeli*), jars (kalah), small cups (*chaki*) for burning oil lamp, pipes, and drums.⁹⁴

Black Smithy:

During the period of our study, the Kamrupi blacksmiths could show their skill in their crafts. They were greatly encouraged by the royal court; According to Maniram Dewan, one Bahikhowa Bar Phukan of Gauhati presented King Rajesvar Singha the biggest cannon made in the period, which were 12 cubit in length and four cubits in circumference. Among the cannons, lying in front of the present court building at Sibasagar, the biggest one is believed to be one presented by the Bahikhowa Phukan to the King.⁹⁵

6. TRADE

Epigraphic and literary sources would reveal that from early times Kamrupa was noted for internal and external trade both by land and water. References have been found in inscriptions of the Vaniks and Vipanis, carrying on internal trade⁹⁶. Marketable commodities were exported not only to the neighbouring provinces but also to neighbouring countries like Burma, Tibet, China by mountain passes, land and water routes. The merchants of Kamrupa carried their merchandise in large boats down from the Brahmaputra and reached the sea after skirting round the Garo Hills.⁹⁷

The Buranjis (History) refer to the promotion of internal trade by the Ahom monarchs by setting up *hats* or markets at convenient locations. Disposal of surplus produce was the primary objective of these markets.⁹⁸ Surplus produce brought to the market consisted of betel leaf, areca-nut, lime, black pepper, mustard seed ginger, earthen-ware, iron-ware, and live-stocks cattle, buffaloes, goats ducks etc⁹⁹ Transactions were usually made by barter or through the medium of cowries.¹⁰⁰ Local transactions were generally made directly between the producer and the consumer through some middlemen or by barter.¹⁰¹

There were large numbers of internal markets in Kamrup. The principal seats of trade were Guwahati, Hajo, Palasbari, Sualkuchi, and Barpeta and periodical *hats*.¹⁰² The district trade was chiefly carried on by means of permanent markets in the towns, but weekly markets are also held for the purpose, and there were three large annual trading fairs. Rice, mustard seed, cotton, *manjit* and lac were the staples of exports.¹⁰³ The articles received in exchange, consist principally of Bengal salt, piece goods, clarified butter, mustard, oil, sugar, brass utensils, etc. Palasbari Hajo, Kamakhya were also important as market town, and the two latter places of pilgrimage.¹⁰⁴ Weekly markets were held in villages like Barapara, Dij Bogai, Sakmuri, Hakim-hat, Jaipur, Malapara, and at many places along the foot of the Khasi Hills.¹⁰⁵ Market tolls (*hatkar*) were collected by *Hatkhowas* at a percentage of the price of good as fixed by the king which of course varied from time.¹⁰⁶

There were large numbers of frontier markets both in northern and southern frontier of Kamrup. Some of the important markets in the south were Sonapur Hat in the Dimoria state, Beltola hat in Beltola, Ranihat in Rani State, Bari hat in Palasbari where Khasis, Jayantiyas and Garos came down from their southern hills in large number with their hill products. The commodities they brought were hoe, *dao*, lime, cotton etc. In the northern frontier important markets were Pulguri hat Dhan hat and others etc.¹⁰⁷

To collect duties and to control illicit transport of goods *Chaukies* or *Chokies* were established at strategic positions. Of all the customs *chokies* mentioned by Buchanon-Hamilton, politically and commercially, the most important was Kandar or Kandahar, styled as Assam Chokey, at the mouth of the river Manah opposite to Goalpara.¹⁰⁸ Politically it was situated at Bangalhat, the traditional western frontier of Assam, and commercially on account of the volume of commercial transactions between Bengal and Assam.¹⁰⁹

Political reasons dictated the Ahom monarchs not only to grant certain rights to border tribes in the adjoining plains but also set up *hats* and fairs for exchange of commodities at places convenient to both.¹¹⁰ Thus, subject to the payment of a nominal tribute in kind, the Deb and the Dharma Rajas of Bhutan were allowed the strips of land, commonly known as the *Duvars*. The seven Duvars, on the north of Kamrup were Bijni, Chappaguri, Chappakhamar, Buxa and Gorkola and Buriguma and Kalling in the district of Darrang.¹¹² The Bhutias used to come down by the valley of the Manah river via Tasgong and Dewangiri to Hajo where a fair was usually held.¹¹³ Assam-Bhutan trade was controlled by an officer titled Ujir Barua at Simaliyabari (Simalabari), a days' journey from the capital of Darrang.¹¹⁴ The Bhutias exchanged lac, woollens, Yak-tails, gold-dust, salt, horses and Chinese silk for Assam *muga*, silk, cotton clothes and dried fish¹¹⁵

Kamrup had trade relations with Bengal. The main centres of trade or transactions with Bengal were Hadira. or the Assam Chaki, Goalpara, Jogighopa and Rangamati.¹¹⁶ The agent of the Assam Government, known as the Duaria Barua, resided at the Assam *choky* situated at the mouth of the Manah river. He enjoyed the exclusive privilege of the trade with Bengal for which he paid to the Assam government an annual rent of 90,000 rupees.¹¹⁷ Occasionally the privilege was granted to two men at the same time. The administration of the district round the Assam choky was entrusted to an officer called the Kandhar Barua.¹¹⁸ The Duaria Barua or Baruas received the goods of the Assam merchants and exchanged them for Bengal products. They realised the duties on all exports and imports. The rates equitably fixed by the government of Assam underwent fluctuations at the heads of different Duaria Baruas. They received advances from the Bengal merchants for the delivery of Assam goods, or accepted Bengal goods on credit. The high rates of duties demanded by the

Duaria Baruas, the non- fulfilment of their contracts or their refusal to carry on trade with particular individuals led to constant frictions with the Bengal merchants.¹¹⁹

Goalpara on the south bank, and Jogighopa and Rangamati on the north, were the three eastern outposts of Bengal from where its merchants conducted their trade with Assam. Goalpara and Jugighopa were populous towns and had streets of shops. The Barphukan, the Viceroy of the king in Gauhati was in over-all charge of looking after the activities of the outpost officers entrusted with the duty of collecting duties and tolls. There were two officers, one at Hadira Choky and the other at Gauhati for collection of duties levied on merchandise.¹²⁰ The Barphukan and Duaria Baruas were carefully selected as the maintenance of harmony and good will between the two states depended in a great measure to their discretion and judgement. The principal commodities of export from Assam were stick lac, munjit or madder, elephants, tusk, pepper, cotton, mustard seeds (*sarsapa*), and silk and muga clothe. Imports consisted mainly of salt, which covered nearly 80% of the total value of imported goods.¹²¹

7. MEDIUM OF EXCHANGE

Trade was carried on usually through barter and the circulation of money was limited. According to Shihabuddin Talish, currency in the Ahom kingdom consisted of cowries rupees and gold coins.¹²² Buranjis (History) make reference to *mohar* (coin), *taka*, *sicca rup* or (rupee), *adhali* (half rupee), *siki* or maha (quarter rupee), *ad- maha* (one eight of a rupee), *charatiya* (one sixteenth of a rupee) and *kara* or *kari* (cowrie); *admaha*, and *charatiya* minted for the first time during the reign of Gaurinath Singha(1780-95). Koch coins called *Narayani* were also accepted in Assam.¹²³

Cowries remained as the media in the medieval period also. Copper-plate inscription of *saka* 1645(1723A.D.) which records the prices of articles in *gandaka* (*ganda*=4 cowries) also signifies the use of *cowry*. The use of *cowry* for petty transactions suggests that prices of commodities were very low in the medieval period.¹²⁴ According to the scholars; gold was probably minted only on special occasions and was not used as normal currency. The silver coins, however, were used in trade, particularly towards the end of the 18th century only. Coins of different denominations and weights were also minted. Scholar refers to both gold and silver coins which were issued at the coronation of the Ahom kings. On certain occasions kings made gifts of coins to officers, priests, Brahmans and other people who paid homage to the kings.¹²⁵

By the end of the century, half, quarter, one-eight and one-sixteenth denominations of coins were in circulation. The standard Ahom rupee-coins weighed a *tola* or two-fifths of an English ounce or 80 *ratis* were known as *taka* (*tanka*). The smaller coins weighing 48, 24 and 12 *ratis* were also issued and in the absence of a copper coinage, *cowries* supplied the needs of petty trade.¹²⁶

An inscription on a stone recording three cases of sales-and purchases of land mentions clearly the *cowries*, silver rupees (*rupcataka*; 6 rupees, *rup data* 2rupees) and common articles, such as areca-nut, betel-leaves, clothes, salt, rice and mustard oil, paid in exchange for land.¹²⁷

Narayani Coins: Inscriptions; supported by literary evidences, show that *Narayani* coins were prevalent in lower Assam during the Ahom rule.¹²⁸ A copper- plate inscription of *saka*1727 (1805 A.D.) of the reign of Kamaleswar Singha records the purchase of one family of seven *paiks* at rupees 140 by the wife of Pratap Ballava Barphukan and dedicated them to the Madhava temple for lighting *akhanda pradipa* and offering *naivedya* for the well-being of Pratap Ballava Baphukan and herself. The purchased men were given Rs 80 *Narayani silver* coins the interest of which was to meet the expenditure for burning the lamp before the shrine.¹²⁹ Koch king Naranarayan(1540-1584) was the first to strike coins in A.D.1555.coins continued to remain widely circulated till the advent of the British. Several inscriptions of the Ahom rulers mention *Narayani* Coins in connection with purchase of articles for worshipping in the temples.¹³⁰

The study of the prices of different commodities as recorded in the inscriptions denotes the prices vary from time to time.¹³¹ It is to be noted that the price of salt was higher than that of rice, pulses and mustard oil. The literary source, however, states that the Bengal salt (imported from Bengal) appears to have ranged in the early period from rupees 2 to 4 per maund and in the later period of the Ahom rule it rose 5 to 10 per *maund*¹³²

The stone inscription of Kamaleswar Singha of *saka*1718 (A.D. 1795-1811) in transaction of sale and purchase of land, reveals that in the later part of the Ahom rule, the coins were dearer in portion with the common articles.¹³³ Naturally people used to exchange necessary articles.¹³⁴ It is seen that where money transaction had to be made, the small denomination of coins and cowries were used along with barter system¹³⁵.

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