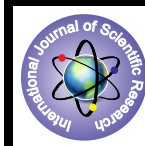


Crisis and Decline of the Ahom State: the Eighteenth Century Perspective



History

KEYWORDS: Shan/ Tai race, Ahom , Brahmaputra valley, Eighteenth Century, Decline

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ABSTRACT

Assam was ruled in the 18th century by Ahoms, who were a branch of the Shan/Tai race. The Shans were occupying the northern and eastern hill tracts of upper Burma and western Yunnan, where they formed a group of states called Mung-mau or Pong. In 1228 AD, the Ahom pressed by the Burmese in the Maulung district of upper Irawadi crossed the Patkai range and entered into the eastern part of the Brahmaputra Valley and Sukapha was the chief of this marshal group of the Ahoms. They had initially established themselves in the south-eastern corner of the Brahmaputra Valley after subjugating the Moran and Borahi tribes, who were then got assimilated with in the Ahom system. The Ahom state was not part of the Mughal Empire except some part of it remain under their control for some time. But the consequent changes in the exiting state structure brought some kind of contradiction. The Ahom state also declined in the eighteenth century and therefore the paper is an attempt to study the process of decline.

Assam is a state in the Indian Union which lies in between 24o and 28o north latitude and from 89o to 96o east longitude, covering total area of 75,523 square kilometre. The state is bound on the north by Bhutan and China, in south by Bangladesh and by Burma (Myanmar) in the east.

However, during 18th century the political boundary of Assam under the Ahoms extended roughly in between 25o and 28o north latitude and 90o and 86o east longitude. The kingdom was based on the fertile valley of the river Brahmaputra which runs across the state all along. The river Manas constituted western boundary of the kingdom and the state encompassed an area of about 17,990 square miles.

I. Political History of Ahom-Assam

Assam was ruled in the 18th century by Ahoms, who were a branch of the Shan/Tai race. The Shans were occupying the northern and eastern hill tracts of upper Burma and western Yunnan,¹ where they formed a group of states called Mung-mau or Pong. In 1228 AD, the Ahom pressed by the Burmese in the Maulung district of upper Irawadi crossed the Patkai range and entered into the eastern part of the Brahmaputra Valley and Sukapha was the chief of this marshal group of the Ahoms.² They had initially established themselves in the south-eastern corner of the Brahmaputra Valley after subjugating the Moran and Borahi tribes, who were then got assimilated with in the Ahom system³

In the Brahmaputra Valley there were established state formations existing prior to 1228. The ancient kingdom of Kamrupa had disintegrated into a number of tribal and non-tribal polities.

The state of Kamrupa existed between the rivers Barnadi and Karotoya and in the east there were two dominant states – Chutiya and Cachari and in the west there were a number of feudal chieftains called Bhuyan.⁴ The political history of the Ahoms was, therefore, largely struggle for the mastery between the new entrants i.e., Ahoms and these state formations. The subsequent centuries were to witness intermittent conflict among the various powers and in this power struggle, the Ahoms, at the cost of already existing state formation, were successful in extending their domination.⁵ Along the political extension the Ahoms kings also adopted a policy of systematic settling of Ahom families in the newly conquered territories to strengthen their position. However, the main foundation on which the establishment of state, its function and domination rested on Ahoms' intervention in the production process, through which it strengthened state structure.⁶ Another factor which helped strengthening of the Ahom state even when they faced existential threat from the mighty Mughal state and its immediate neighbour, was its adoption and absorption of the Mughal institutions and influences.

II. Economic, Political and Ideological Practices in State Formations

Pre-Ahom Assam comprised of vast alluvial plain, jungle and marshes and due to the heavy rainfall in the region, its major

economic activity was rice-cultivation. The tribal groups inhabited the region, using primitive methods of cultivation like jhooming and employing hoe and stick, were producing dry variety of rice (Ahu).⁷

The Ahoms introduced wet rice economy by reclaiming land. They cleared the forests and levelled the surface, using better iron implements and had employed the technique of water control on the slopes, which proved crucial for the wet rice cultivation⁸ as these allowed them to retain rain water for longer period. This had started a flourishing agrarian economy and had seen emergence of network of embankment, which necessitated compulsory state service by the militia organised under Paik system and the paiks were allowed to cultivate community wet rice land free of tax.⁹ This led to the emergence of king as a despot.

The agrarian economy was primary means of production and theoretically the king was the owner of the land who used to give it in grants to nobility and paiks in lieu of their service and rent free grants for religious purpose.¹⁰ A paik used to possess three types of land firstly, household and orchards, secondly, inferior land used for cultivation of ah, mustard etc. and thirdly, the wet rice land. The third category was very important and owned by the state, which granted it to paik whereas the first two category happened to be in private possession with some clannish restriction and similarly these categories of land were available in abundance. But, a paik could not sale, gift or mortgage the land.¹¹

Later the Ahom state also allotted land grants to brahmins for temple and religious purposes namely, Brahmottar, Devottar and Dharmottar and during neo-vaishnism movements, the gossains and satras also received land grants.¹² All ruling clans or powerful clans were expected to be loyal to king and these include political as well as spiritual nobility. The king depended on the service of the nobles and nobles always remained loyal to king, as only he had the authority of granting or withdrawing paik service. The king used to be on the top and noble in the middle of pyramidal social structure and the base was comprised of peasants. The first two had parasitic existence over the peasants like Mughal nobility.

In Assam two major varieties of rice ah and sali were cultivated, where sali was more productive and required wet climate as well as transplantation. The Ahoms were able to raise ridge or barrier to contain required amount of rain water.¹³ The construction of the ridges or barriers required huge manpower and thus, a system evolved which enlisted the whole adult male population and the organisation was divided into khel where each member of the khel was called paik. The khel was further divided into got consisting of four paik each and each got was expected to render one man year of service to the state and when one paik rendered the service of the state the rest of the got cultivate the land thus, ensuring continuous supply of food grain despite absence of a particular paik.¹⁴ Thus, the

medieval Assamese economy was self-sufficient having artisans and craftsmen available in the village itself for carrying out non-agricultural production. The state also made efforts to bring artisans and craftsmen from the rest of India into Assam and the Mughal influence introduced with arrival of new crafts like making granulated sugar, tailoring etc.¹⁵

In the caste hierarchy the Brahmin, Daivajana and Kayastha were on the top and the untouchables were at the bottom and also had a range of intermediary castes including kalita. The upper caste were enjoying privileged position and were granted land grants, paiks as well as important administrative position.¹⁶

So far the political system was concerned the king was supreme authority and supported by monarchical oligarchy. There used to be a council of ministers consisting of the buragohain, the bargohain and the barpatragohain. The head of the judicial organisation happened to be barbarua and an official designated as barphukan based at Gauhati (Guwahati) not only acted as viceroy and administered the province west of Kaliabor but also maintained diplomatic relations with other states like Mughal, Bhutan etc.¹⁷

Next in the hierarchy, there was Phukans, six each of whom formed the concil of barbarua and the barphukan and then in the rank were baruas followed by rajkhowas, katakis and dolois. Besides there were many petty officials like hazarika, boras and saikias who were enjoying some exemptions from the compulsory taxes.¹⁸

As the king was repository all powers, the final authority rested with him. The Ahom concept of kingship too, believed in the divine origin of kingship, therefore, he could not be questioned as his command and will was the will and command of God. They were, therefore, also entitled as swargadeo and all honours, titles etc. emanated from him. The expressed ideology was unity, benevolence and justice.¹⁹

The Ahom society was stratified in aristocracy, common people and in late period the division was in between higher caste and lower caste and the lower caste could not even imitate the higher caste in dress code. The common people were not allowed to construct house of masonry. The kayastha and kalita were enjoying good social status, though resented by the Ahoms.²⁰ Ahoms and several other tribes were admitted into Hinduism by the end of 17th century but assigned to peasant caste of lower order. The Ahoms retaliated by not allowing any high caste Hindu to enter into higher administrative echelon.²¹

Agricultural produce did not form any surplus and the artisan services fulfilled agricultural need.²² The mode of exchange was barter system by which the betel leaves and nuts were exchanged in local markets.²³ Shihabuddin Talish testified about small daily bazar in the lanes of capital Gargaon in 1660 where the settlers sold only betel leaves.²⁴ However, surplus was absent, but some production was made to exchange with the products of essential need which resulted in the creation of quasi-marketing network.²⁵ Therefore, the production was determined by the use-value instead of being market oriented.²⁶

The self-sufficiency of the village caused the immobility of people and in fact transportation system did not develop much in Brahmaputra Valley. Even the state also induced this seclusion by not allowing outsiders to enter and since the trade with external world was controlled by the state through its officials the state did not allow any amount of interaction.²⁷ The evolution of the society was fairly homogenous as it was mainly comprised of one major ethnic community – the Assamese an Indo-Aryan race²⁸ and other minority groups got assimilated within the main stream.

Although society did not allow immigration, but on embracing Hinduism, the Ahom kings invited several upper caste people mostly from Bengal.²⁹ Such immigration got momentum during reign of Rudra Singha and gradually Hinduism became dominant religion of Assam.³⁰ Several Brahmin families migrated to Assam and were known as Kamrupia brahmin, Vaidik brahmin

and Rashi Brahmins. Similarly, ganaks or acharyas also immigrated from Bengal³¹ and immigration of these group had increased tremendously during the reign of Sib Singha (1714-44) and they all got assimilated.³²

Although it is not possible to estimate the number of upper caste Hindus who might have migrated to Assam, but it certainly signifies the decreasing opportunity in Bengal and Mughal states, which were passing through critical phase, particularly when the Bengal rulers were bent upon maximisation of revenue collection and were trying to reclaim even the land in charity (madad-i-mash) and religious grants. Perhaps the declining opportunity prompted several high caste Brahmins to migrate to Assam.

The Muslims were invited in Assam, solely for conducting diplomatic relations with the Mughals, as soldiers and in some cases even as prisoner. These sections were also gradually absorbed into the main stream.³³ The assimilation was so complete that rarely anyone went back to original native place. Shihabuddin Talish says,

“..as no one who entered this country (Assam) ever returned and the manner of its native were never made known to any outsiders the people of Hindustan used to call the inhabitants of Assam sorcerers and magicians and consider them as standing outside the human species. The saying is that whoever enters this country is overcome by its charms and never comes out of it.”³⁴

Despite assimilation there seems to be some resentment against these foreign elements who were called bongals and during repeated Mughal invasions the resentment got heightened³⁵ and at time demands were made to expel the bongals. Foreigners were looked upon suspiciously and customs and dress of bongals were treated as taboo.³⁶

The Assamese culture was greatly influenced by the Vaishnava movement led by Shankerdev (1449-1569) and Madhavdev (1489-1596). In fact it was religious, social and literary reform movement.³⁷

The despotic king established a strong state by initiating a single production process amalgamating several food-gathering groups, created militia, and introduced wet rice cultivation in place of jhooming. The society was insular and more homogenised and with the adoption of Hinduism as state religion several tribal groups joined it, but the accompanying caste system was curbed due to all pervasive vaishava movement. The stabilised community continued till mid-eighteenth century when the stabilisation process got disturbed.

III. Mughal Impact on Assam

The Mughal invasion of neighbouring Koch territory was the beginning of the direct Mughal influence on the Ahom polity. Similarly annexation of lower Assam had also created a situation where the reciprocal exchange of ideas had taken place.³⁸

The creation of two offices of bar barua and bar phukan was done in the early seventeenth century by Pratap Singha and the reorganisation was, obviously, made due to Mughal influence to maintain territorial unity and to check the Mughals advance.³⁹ Similarly some of the Mughal personnel who were taken as war prisoner were also absorbed in the military and civil administration and were given designation like bora, saikia, hazarika along with their original titles, thus, it infused a new element into the administration.⁴⁰

Due to the overwhelming influence of Mughals, the administration was also fashioned on pattern of the Mughal territory wherever their occupation lasted for some time. Where administrative unit of pargana, comprising several villages come into existence along with certain influential persons entitled as chaudhury, talukdar, majumdar, bhuyan etc.⁴¹ Such organisation come into operation mainly in the lower part of the Brahmaputra valley and later on the maujadari system in upper and central Assam was influenced by the pargana system which brought changes in the paik and khel system.⁴²

Due to Mughal occupation of Kamrup several changes in the Ahom judicial system were discernible as the Ahom kings resorted to severity and cruelty in dispensing criminal justice, which also enabled them to curb internal rebellion and later on they had delegated the judicial powers to provincial governor of Gauhati.⁴³

The Mughals had imposed its revenue administration on the koch system which had in fact, increased the role of money in the economic life there towards the close of 17th century. Since, then the profound changes had began to take place not only in the Koch kingdom but also in the adjacent Ahom kingdom. The Mughals demanded revenue in cash in lieu of traditional militia service from the paik allotment.⁴⁴

Subsequently, the Ahom ousted the Mughals from the larger part of Koch-Hajo area but they could not throw the Mughal land revenue system.⁴⁵ Even in the Ahom territories the relatively affluent paiks wanted, frequently, to commute their service obligation into cash or kind payments⁴⁶ and the Ahom State had no option but to increasingly concede the commutation demand though with some reluctance and it resulted in radical changes in the economy.⁴⁷

In the Ahom state there was no land survey but occasional manpower census was made. Such census dates back to 1510AD.⁴⁸ This was because it was not the custom of the Ahom to collect any land revenue from the cultivator. But in every house one man out of three had to render service to the monarch. Shihabuddin Talish observed

"If this country was administered like the imperial dominion (Mughal), it is very likely that forty to forty-five lakhs of rupees would be collected from the revenue paid by the raiyats, the price of elephants caught in the jungles and other sources."⁴⁹

This Mughal thinking had influenced the Ahoms also and impressed by the Mughal land measurement system, they started countrywide detailed land survey which was completed during the years 1681-1751.⁵⁰ Due to the influence from the Mughal system, the Ahom state was shifting from the human resources to the land resource as a source of revenue generation. In that process attempts were made to detect taxable wet rice land held in excess of the prescribed paik allotments and explore new avenues of taxation, while keeping the militia system basically intact. Land surveyors were brought from Koch-Bihar and Bengal. Selective commutation of labour service obligations for cash was also in progress. By 1663 pineapple and tobacco, both contribution from the Mughal territory which got these from new world, were under the cultivation in the region and both were important cash crops.⁵¹

By the end of 16th century some type of land definitely acquired a saleable value in the western part of the region, though land sales were still few and far between. The author of Katha Guru Charita casually refers three such transactions related to the purchase of homestead plots, taking place in the 16th century.⁵² In the next century land sales had become more frequent. The fact of land purchases actually taking place was corroborated by several extant documents. Three of them dated to 1667, 1685 and 1723 belonged to the period of our concern.⁵³ The first is a sanad issued during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb in favour of two temples priest of pargana Pandu. Though it was not a sale deed but it mentioned the price of land donated. The second and third were, in fact, land transaction deeds and in each of which a high ranking noble in office had featured as purchaser. The third document recorded the purchase of nine acres of plot suited to both orchard and rice cultivation at the price of Rs. 25 from some villagers of the Maligaon, pargana Dehar.⁵⁴ These also include the place of transaction, names of the witness present as well as the boundary demarcation. All the places mentioned in these documents however, related to the western Assam, i.e., the district of Kamrup.⁵⁵

It appears that in the eastern Assam the wet rice land even when recognised as saleable, remain inseparably linked with over-riding clan and community rights until the eventual col-

lapse of the Ahom State. On the other hand, in lower Assam, we find emergence of Zamindari system on line of Mughal Bengal.⁵⁶

Assam had old trading relation with Bengal⁵⁷ and Tavernier mentioned that Dacca would export ornaments of coral, amber and shell to Assam, Bhutan, Nepal and Siam.⁵⁸ Goalpara, Jogigopha and Rangamati were the three eastern outpost of Bengal from where its merchants would transact their trade with the frontier officers, as the Ahom being suspicious, did not gave privileges to trading agents.⁵⁹ Even Jagat Seth had his agents in Goalpara, Jogighopha and Kandahar Chowky, the trading centres in Assam which he withdrew when he faced problems.⁶⁰ There appears to be substantial trade as pointed out by S N Bhattacharyya,

"In exchange for elephants tusk, hide of Chamari cow, pepper, musk, silk cloth, gold lingumaloes and jaluk and other kinds of aromatic plants to be had in abundance in Assam, the Assamese used to import from the Mughal domain various kinds of winter clothing i.e., Lahori, Bapta, Banat to protect themselves against the rigorous cold in their hilly habitation."⁶¹

The Ahom king Rudra Singha (1696-1714) tried to increase the volume of trades, with Mughal Bengal and Himalayan tracts. Gait informs us that,

The trade with Bengal was considerable and the officials who formed the customs revenue paid rupees 90,000 a year to the Bar-phukan of which, however, only 36,000 reached the royal treasury.⁶²

Such economic interaction bound to make circulation of money indispensable which had gradually finished the barter system. During the Mughal period, the external trade of the region got diversified along with significant advancement made towards monetization⁶³ and by the middle of the 17th century the kings were minting gold and silver coins and coins of several denominations were issued. It seems that the rapid increase in money supply from several sources indicated that the demand for medium of exchange and trade, both intra-regional and inter-regional, were increasing over the years 1500-1750AD.⁶⁴

However, the adaptation and absorption of the Mughal influences had become sources of the instability of the Ahom state. The Ahom state was basically a tribal system and the adaptation of the Mughal feudal features into this largely tribal structure created contradiction in forms. This had started the process of gradual feudalisation of Ahom structure, which ultimately brought down the tribal structure with which the 600 years old Ahom state ended.⁶⁵

The despotic Ahom king brought diverse food gathering groups into fold of single food producer process. The conquest of the neighbouring Chieftdoms led to the enlistment of the conquered people as member of the militia, which fostered this process. The wet rice cultivation soon replaced jhooming through out the province and the economic life followed a uniform pattern. The absorption of the Mughal feature brought monetization into the economy.

The bhakti movement and institutionalised Hinduism which emerged during the Mughal rule, made its appearance in the Ahom state as well. Thus, besides economic features, even the cultural influences of Mughal State are discernible in the Ahom State. This led to adaptation of Hinduism by the royalty as state religion which further helped the process of cultural exchange. Several tribal groups joined the main stream of Hinduism. The divisive consequences of the Hinduism in this society was the rise of the caste system.

The vaishnavite movement under the leadership of Shankar Deva was a part of the all India bhakti movement. The satra monastery institution developed as a counter centre of power. The rise in power and privileges of the satra institution signify the developments of productive process.⁶⁶ Under the satra, there were huge land grants and a number of attached peasants, which together earned huge revenue for the satras. Each satras

institutions emerged as powerful landlord. The advancement sponsored the feudal economy, which could not be checked any longer by the Ahom State and it signifies its loss of vitality. This led to the disintegration of its basic structure and functioning pattern.

Like, the advancement of feudalism, in religious garb (satras, satradhikar/landlords). A powerful peasants uprising also took place in the religious garb, known as moamaria rebellion, which took place in 1770s. The movement soon acquired a political colour but the weak Ahom state failed to check the uprising, imposition of puppet kings, counter-revolution and fresh uprising followed the inter-cine quarrel of the royal family led some of them to invite foreign forces into Assam. Thus, they had opened the state for the outsiders. First, the Burmese were invited who virtually ruled from 1819-24 and then the British entered to expel the Burmese but later continued to stay on and replaced Ahoms as rulers.

IV. Crisis

The socio-economic evolution of the Ahom system and the growing inherent contradiction began to manifest in 18th century in the form of structural imbalance and crisis. The Ahom system did not allow secular landlordism to grow but landlordism did emerge in the form of religious aristocracy.⁶⁷ With the growth of their power – a crisis in the existing socio-political order manifested. The structural crisis had reflected in the long drawn civil war, which broke out during second half of the 18th century spear headed by the moamarias against the authority of the Ahom State. This uprising had further aggravated the crisis. The political disintegration coupled with the economic destruction of old order was cumulative result of this crisis.⁶⁸

By the 17th century the Ahom polity had emerged as a state with considerable power of coercion, although it based still in largely tribal formation. From 17th century, the process of consolidation of land lordism (feudalism) was evident from the emergence of spiritual property holder and numerous vassal states linked to the Ahom state by ties of political dependence. In the 17th century Ahom monarch Pratap Singha affected a reorganisation by which the state control over the distribution of communal wet rice land, mobilisation of the surplus in the form of the central labour pool and redistribution of this surplus amongst the various elements of ruling class and bureaucracy had been centralised to great extent, but this centralisation proved to be still weak because even by 18th century the militia and bureaucracy at the top still retained its original tribal character to considerable extent. This unresolved contradiction between the feudal and tribal elements within the militia was an important factor in the civil war between the rulers and ruled. On the other hand spiritual lords and extensive feudalisation of state structure had restricted and weakened the power of the crown.

The ideological concept of swargdeo was given a jolt by the vaishnavite movement which also weakened pre-eminent position of the king.⁶⁹ With the low level of surplus production, the Ahom State was increasingly finding it difficult to maintain an over increasing ruling class. Opportunity for satisfying personal ambition were also being reduced.

The long years of peace and relative prosperity had sapped the vigour of the Ahom nobility and officials and they refused to go for active service. Intrigues, corruption power rivalry and sectarian dispute racked the nobility and higher officials of the state. All these were indications of deepening crisis in the body polity.⁷⁰ A parallel to this development could be seen in the Mughal court politics after death of Aurangzeb.

The actual crisis was emerging in the economic structure. The dominant mode of appropriation of the Ahom State was labour rent which it obtained from its subjects. This surplus was subjected from the militia organised out of adult male population. The extension of wet rice production had resulted in the increased productivity which could sustain large population as well as growing state apparatus. But the population of Assam continued to remain poor or lived at the subsistence level hence,

where the state political hierarchy and royalty continued to expand the surplus, militia did not keep the commensurate pace. This factor emerged to be most important contradiction for the Ahom economy during 18th century.

The Ahom State had began the practice of granting large landed estate along with paik allotments to the religious heads, and institutions notably the satras. Every paik so granted meant a loss of surplus to the state as the Brahmins and Satras were exempted from making any payment to the state either in kind or cash. Being a labour starved region and a system where labour was essential input, the withdrawal of such number of labour undermined the very basis of the economy.

The state sought to make up it by increasing the number of man days, labour service which each paik had to render to the state, from three months to four months and this subjected the paiks to more exploitation. To evade this exploitation or bounded service the paiks used to become voluntary slaves or take refuge in the monasteries as bakats.⁷¹ By the mid 18th century the Ahom State, thus, finding it difficult to obtain enough paiks to do obligatory service to the state due to increasing tendency of paik to become bakats.⁷²

In Ahom state, the labour service was mainly linked to agrarian production. In the Ahom State, within the peasants the most discontented were bahatia and moran paiks. The bahatia were class of paiks who were settled by the state to pay an annual subsidy called posa to the hill tribe so that they (hill tribe) remain contented and did not commit raids on plains. Besides paddy and rice the bahatias had to give cloth, cattle and salt. In addition they also had to perform the obligatory labour service to the state. The dual service to the state had resulted in enormous antipathy among the bahatia against the Ahom State.⁷³

The morans were a martial tribe absorbed by the Ahom and brought under the paik system. They were to supply a variety of local products and animals, like elephants, fuel, ivory, honey, bamboo, wax, raw cotton and vegetable dyes etc. to the Ahom State. With the increase in the intensity of paik system, its rigidity associated with the system like restriction on the mobility of peasants and prescribed strict standard of living created anger among the morans as the exploitation increased further in the 18th century - the rebelliousness of the morans also became more intense.⁷⁴ In fact, the morans constituted largest number of followers of the moamaria satra which was first to rebel against the Ahom State.

As discussed above by the middle of the 18th century trade with outside and internal market within the region had developed, as it is evident from the increasing supply of currency. The increase in the volume of external trade and internal network of market system and emergence of merchant class was direct result of the Mughal contact. But the Ahom State continued its policy of imposing restriction on the external trade by monopolising external commerce.⁷⁵ But the dynamics of changing economy was such that it precipitated a crisis in the system which was preventing the growth of trade and commerce.

The restrictive nature of paik system hindered free movement of artisans which was necessary for further specialisation and development to take place. The better off section could commute their obligation for money payments. But this was not possible on large scale and this proved to be major contradiction between an autocratic state and change in economy. The militia constituted the backbone of the economy, therefore, the state could not grant commutation of service obligation to an unlimited extent. It could be so only to the extent to which it (state) needs money.

There was also, what M. Athar Ali calls, cultural failure and the Ahom State and society did not show capacity to appreciate and adopt technological developments even from the Mughal State leaving aside European technology. Although features of the Mughal economy was introduced in the Ahom State structure but it failed to borrow any of its technological innovation as well as European technology. Like the Mughal polity suffered due to

its failure to appreciate and adopt the European technology and the stagnating technology in Mughal state put it in disadvantageous position vis-à-vis European power, the Ahom state too suffered.

Since the introduction of wet rice cultivation by the Ahom there was no technological improvement. Irrigation was still done through putting manpower whereas we find large-scale use of Persian wheel, saqiya and even canal construction in the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal India. In Ahom the labour was still the input in the cultivation. Even in the military domain the Ahoms failed to make any technological innovation.

This explains the defeat of the Ahom by a religious sect called moamaria comprised of mainly ordinary peasants.

V. Manifestation of the Crisis

Cultural impact of the Mughal India on Assam was the spread of bhakti movement in Ahom State. Beginning from the 15th century single monastic faith based on bhakti was popularised by Shankar Dev and his disciple. It was based on teaching of Bhagwat Purana. The neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam, however, had certain distinction compared to Bhakti movement of rest of India. One of its distinguishing feature was the establishment of satra or monasteries, each headed by a guru known as satradhikar gossain or Mahanta for purposes of proselytization.

The cult took strong roots in the masses over the subsequent centuries. The Satra institution became the centre of wealth and power. By the end of 17th century, the original church of Shankar Dev had been divided into four Samhitas (order). These were Bhrahmo, Purush, Nika and Kala. These division were on the basis of debates on idol worship, brahmanical rights, celibacy and propriety of initiation of a Brahmin by a sudra etc. Those satras, which conformed to the above practices enjoyed the patronage of the Ahom State. The most non conformist was kala samhita of Gopal Dev. This denomination had the largest following among the lower caste and tribal population.

The Moamaria satra belonged to this kala samhita. They were made up of diverse group of people belonging to various caste and tribes – united only in their adherence to a single common guru – the Moamaria Gossain. The Moamaria were known for their fanatical devotion to their guru – an uncommon exclusiveness in their rituals. They looked up their guru as God incarnates, because of their unique hold over their disciple and immense material prosperity. The Moamaia Goswami were looked upon with jealousy and suspicion by the Ahom monarch particularly by Pratap Singha. Due to this the Moamaria satra and its Gossain functionaries on numerous occasions were subjected to state persecution and humiliation during 18th century.

The first Moamaria rebellion broke out in 1769 and the immediate cause was the flogging of a moran chief by the Ahom minister Kirti Chandra Barbarua. The already prepared morans revolted against the Ahom State and defeated the royalist forces successively and took control of the capital city of Rangpur.

Although the morans had to retreat later but it had shattered the myth of the invincibility of Ahom State. In retaliation Ahom gained control of the estate and persecuted Moamaria Mohanta and his son and continued to hunt down the moran.

The second uprising took place in 1773 and was confined to Garhgaon and Rangpur and attempts were made to do away with the Ahom king Gaurinath Singha. So much so that the throne was uncontested for the Moamaras. The rebels were, however, defeated by the royal forces and due to the state's persecution policy depopulated almost half of Moamaria areas.

The next revolt broke out in 1786 initially it began from a place called Japaibheti situated in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra. The uprising of the Moamaria and bahatia was led by Harihar Matak – a weaver by profession. This time virtual breakdown of the Ahom State authority took place and the king leaving behind the Prime Minister to defend the country from the rebel, escaped to Guwahati in January 1788. The royal forces were repeatedly defeated and the Ahom militia become ineffective and inefficient. Many of the uprooted Ahom noble had taken shelter in the districts of Darrang and Nawgong but the popular discontent also broke out in these two districts also against extortion and exploitation of Ahom officers. The king was compelled by the people to change officials and about 240 villages of Darrang had called their militia of 6000 men from Guwahati.

The demoralization and loss of Ahom power indicated when British help was sought by Gaurinath Singha to curb the internal strife and with the help of British troops led by Captain Welsh, the revolt was quelled and Ahom political authority restored. The Moamaria left the capital and retreated to Bengmara.

Captain Welsh was recalled due to Sir John Shore's non-interventionist policy as a result the resurrection and conspiracy continued during the reign of Kamleshwar Singha. But by this time the indigenous military group formed on the company lines, succeeded in subjugating the Moamaria and killed their leaders. But, by then the weakness of the Ahom state was exposed and it was only a matter of time when the state had its final eclipse.

Apparently the Moamaria rebellion appears to be a religious uprising, where it had inculcated the feeling of oneness and perceived injustice of the Ahom State. Although the religious heads played their role in the earlier part but in the later part of rebellion, they played little role except being symbol of unity.

The state wanted to control the expanding power of the satra, as it was becoming source of conflict and thus tried to suppress the movement without success. However, the rebellion appears to be representative of the socio-economic and political crisis prevailed in 18th century Ahom state formation. The most of the leaders of the rebellion were ordinary peasants and of ordinary descent and there were localized revolts by diverse groups. The result not only weakened the Ahom State but also signify the structural changes which could not be contained in the existing system. Thus, the crisis were manifestation of demise of the old system.

Interestingly the composition and activities of Moamaria seems to be very similar to satnamis and sikhism both were largely peasant religion and to some it was akin to Jats who were a caste peasant par excellence. The Jats had plundered the imperial territory with impunity. Similarly, the satnami and Sikh rebellion had produced the agrarian crisis in the Mughal empire which caused the decline of the authority. Similarly, Moamaria rebellion produced crisis for the Ahom State. The root of the problem rest in adoption of some of Mughal influence like partial commutation of labour service into cash, land survey and state's endeavour to reclaim more and more wet rice land and excessive state demand and exploitation resulted in flight of paiks to satra causing labour shortage and decline in state income which was bound to produce crisis.

Interestingly the Ahom nobility also depended on surplus extraction (labour service or rent in form of kind or cash) and problem in surplus realisation was unsettling for the ruling class. Due to technological stagnation, the state failed to create any alternative as an antidote of the crisis.*

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Ball. | Sushil Chandra Dutta, op. cit., p. 223. | The role of indigenous banking house has been analysed with reference to the Jagat Seths by Karen Leonard, "The 'Great Firm' Theory of the Decline of the Mughal Empire", in Muzaffar Alam & S. Subrananyam (ed.), *The Mughal State 1526-1750*, Delhi, 1998, pp. 398-418. | Sudhindra Nath Bhattacharyya, *A History of Mughal North-East Frontier Policy*, Delhi, Rep., 1994, p. 289. | Edward Gait, cited in Sushil Chandra Dutta, op. cit., p. 225. | Amalendu Guha, "Medieval North-East India", op. cit., p. 15. | *Ibid.*, p. 16. | *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 15-21. | | Sajal Nag, *Roots of Ethnic Conflict*, op. cit., p. 17, cf., Amalendu Guha, *ibid.*, p. 37. | | Sajal Nag, "The Socio-economic Base of Medieval Assam", op. cit., pp. 37, 39-40. | Tejimala Gurung, op. cit., pp. 163-182. | *Ibid.*, p. 166. | *Ibid.*, p. 164, see also E. Gait, op. cit., pp. 184-87. | Tejimala Gurung, *ibid.*, pp. 167-68. | *Ibid.* | Similar instances had been seen in the Mughal Empire and later on in Bengal Nazimate. In the Mughal Empire the peasantry was excessively taxed and moreover the peasantry had to pay over and above (sair) the regular revenue demands. Although the practice of ijara had started in the 17th century, but its rampant operation has been seen in the 18th century, where the actual jagirdars allows contractors to realise land revenue on their behalf after receiving a acceptable amount from these contractors or revenue farmers (ijara). The over exploitation due to revenue farming (ijaradari) several peasants migrated from the Mughal territory to the raja's territory in 17th century and more in 18th century to evade misery and there was tendency to join religious institutions to seek revenue concessions. | Similarly, the reforms of Bengal nazims (Nawabs) enabled them to maximise the revenue collection by reducing the number of zamindaris and through ruthless realisation. The introduction of money lending class in the rural area proved to be more exploitative after some time though state could collect its demands. The excessive exploitation of peasantry was an important reason for the agrarian crisis in the Mughal State which greatly weakened the state. Once, crisis appeared in main productive system in agrarian sector and which afflicted other sectors too, the state crumbled due to absence of alternative to correct the imbalance. | *Ibid.*, p. 168. | *Ibid.* | Sajal Nag, "The Socio-economic Base of Medieval Assam", op. cit., pp. 41-45. | * Ashin Dasgupta's pioneering work (cited above) links decline of Surat and hinterland after British conquest. There was drastic shift from inland trade to overseas trade, leading to decline in the activities of native merchants. Decline of inland trade must have deprived Ahom State a sizeable income and must have aggravated the crisis. Further exploration of sources is required to establish such connection in respect of eastern frontier of Bengal State formation. |