

# The Paik System in Medieval Assam: A Study of Its Evolution and Impact under the Ahom Dynasty

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## Abstract:

The Ahom dynasty, which ruled for nearly 600 years during the medieval period, introduced new mechanism in cultivation practice, replacing the existing tribal mode of production, and brought significant changes in the political, social, economic, and cultural scenario of medieval Assam. The introduction Paik system and its effective enforcement changed the social pattern and administrative system of the state. Although this system enriched the economy of the state and enhanced the political strength of the Ahom rulers, at the same time, the common tribal people of the region were deprived of their social freedom and had to remain confined within the boundaries set by the state administration. This paper attempts to study the Paik system and analyze its evolution and impact on the tribal people and the Ahom Kingdom.

**Keywords:** Paik system, Ahoms, tribes, peasants, agriculture, traditional, administration.

## Introduction

The Ahoms were an offshoot of the Shan branch of great Tai or Thai family of South-East Asia. Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom dynasty in the Brahmaputra Valley, left his homeland called Maulung in Upper Burma around 1215 and entered the Brahmaputra Valley in 1228, where he established a powerful Ahom kingdom in Assam. With the advent of the Ahom dynasty in Assam, several significant changes took place in the polity, society, economy, agricultural practices of the Valley. They introduced a new system of agriculture with advanced methods, which superseded the existing traditional method practiced by various tribal communities of the region. Over time, the Ahoms brought about a transformation in the existing political, social, and economic structures. With a view to establishing a well-organized administrative structure and necessary social institution, they introduced a new system called the Paik system, which was highly relevant for economic development and organisation of the military force. Thus, the institution of the Paik system held a great significance in the administrative machinery of the Ahom kingdom. The Paik or Khel system was the backbone of the Ahom administration and the driving force behind the Ahom economic system.

## Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is descriptive-cum-analytical. The study is primarily based on secondary sources of information. Relevant materials and data have been collected from a variety of sources including books, articles, journals, published works, proceedings, and web-based resources.

### Evolution of the Paik System

The organizations of 'Paik or Khel' system emerged during the Ahom rule, as a result of the interaction between the Ahoms and the tribes conquered by the Ahom rulers, who lived in the southeastern part of the Brahmaputra Valley. When the Ahoms entered into the Valley, they came with a knowledge of improved mode of production known as Sali kheti (wet rice cultivation), which eventually superseded the existing practices rice cultivation. Before the arrival of the Ahoms, the earliest tribes of the Valley namely the Marans and the Barahis, cultivated their communal land using primitive equipment and supplemented their livelihood through fishing and hunting activities. The Ahoms were eager to exploit the conquered tribes and therefore, attempted to establish a forms of tributary relationship with them, sometimes by force and sometimes by mutual agreement, which resembled a form of virtual slavery. Thus, Sukapha, the first king of the Ahom dynasty introduced a new approach through which he exacted a personal services from members of the tribal communities in the forms of fuel suppliers, water drawers, honey suppliers, etc. In the course of time, they expanded their territories westward and northward and conquering new territories, where they introduced the use of the plough and irrigation. As a result, the mode of production and social relation reached a relatively advanced stage. Along the way, the Ahoms developed the concept of private or personal property. Gradually, the society of the valley became divided into two classes- the rulers and the ruled, in which, the latter tended to identify themselves with the rest of the subject population as the non-Ahoms. With the expansion of Ahom power, it became necessary to appoint different new officers to meet the increased of administrative work load. Consequently, the Ahom rulers elaborate the existing system of exacting personal service from their subjects to meet the internal needs of the state. The result was the creation of the Paik or khel system, which was systematically implemented by an officers named Momai Tamuli Barbarua under the patronage of King Pratap Singha. Later, the Paik system was implemented more rigidly during the reign of King Jayadhvaj Singha.

The rigid and vigorous system of exacting personal service became inevitable in view of frequent threats to Ahom power from the west in the form of Mughal invasions. This, thus appears to have been a decisive factors in reorganizing the society, which proved effective in recruiting the soldiers to build resistance against the Mughals.

Traditionally, the land of the state belonged to tribal communities and it became necessary to reorganize these communities into Paik or Khel units in order to continue enjoying ownership of the land. The question of interfering with this convention did not arise, as there was an abundance of uncleared and uncultivated land in the state. However, the king retained the right to evacuate any people from any land and resettle them elsewhere, which indicates that he was, theoretically, the owner of all land in the kingdom.

Along with the growth of private or personal property among the Ahom royal class in the kingdom, acquired through the process of dissolution of tribal communities, therefore, the Ahoms were encouraged to subjugate these communities systematically. At the same time, these aboriginal tribal communities, which were independent or semi-independent, were seen as a source of menace to the monarchy,. Therefore, it became necessary to bring them under complete submission. Accordingly, this was done by resetting them into different Paiks or Khels. The tribal society was further disintegrated with the development and advancement in agricultural production, which gradually superseded the tribal mode of production in the course of time. It was expected to open new possibilities for trade and large-scale commodity production. However, it did not not happen, rather, the Khel system deprived people of their freedom of movement and restricted them to their respective places of work. Though they emerged from

their narrow tribal confines to a great extent, soon, they were subjected to a new stage of bondage and failed to undertake new enterprises that could have become the material force for a new social formation. As a result, there emerged sharp distinction between the ruler and the ruled, which reached its climax in the popular revolts during the later part of 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Paik system**

The term 'Paik or Khel' referred to every adult male subjects between the ages of 16 to 50 under the Ahom government. A unit called a got was formed, comprising four paiks. Each paik had to render his service to the state for a period of three months a year on a rotation basis. The cultivation or domestic work of the paik on duty was looked after by the other paiks of the got. However, during the time of state emergency, two or sometime even three paiks were recruited from a got. The first paik in a got was called the mul, then the second the dewal, the third the tewal. It was worth mentioning that some paiks were organized into professional khels, each of which was assigned to a particular kind of work, such as boat-building or arrow-making for the state. The larger khels were placed under the charge of a Phukan; for example, the Naosaliya Phukan was incharge of the boat-builders, khels. Smaller khels such as those of the bow-makers, were placed under the charge of a Barua like the Dhenu-chocha Barua. However, a class of officers known as Rajkhowas were placed in incharge of approximately 3,000 paiks in a specified area. The state had full control over the paiks. To maintain the strict supervision over the paiks, several officers were appointed based on the numbers of paiks. Accordingly, an officer called Bora was appointed over every twenty paiks, Saikia commanded a hundred paiks, a Hazarika commanded a thousand paiks, and a Phukan was in charge of six thousand paiks. It was mandatory that one paik from each got was always available for service, in a time of war, sometimes even three paiks were recruited from each got for military service, in such case the entire burden of the got fell upon to a single paiks. It was considered serious offence, if any paik conceal his duty and such cases were dealt with very severely. The paiks had to fulfil certain obligations, in addition to rendering their personal service to the state. For Example, they had to cultivate the lands of their masters and offer them gifts on certain specific occasions.

Further, the paiks were largely divided into two categories: Kanri and Chamua. The paiks who were bound to serve as soldier during wartime and as a labourer during peacetime were known as Kanri paiks. There were some other class of paiks as well, such as the Bilatiya paiks who worked as tenants on the private land estate of the nobles, the Dewaliya paiks who were allotted to the temples and Satras. The Bahatias paiks who rendered service to their respective hill masters.

Those born into relatively affluent house were called Chamua paiks. Chamua paiks could obtain exemption from personal state service by paying commutation money. These paiks generally belonged to dispossessed Bhuyans or landlords, members of the Chutiya nobility, traders, artisans, scribes, etc. They were often appointed to junior offices like those of Bora, Saikia, Tamuli, Pachani. Thus, the practice of paying commutation money created a new class between the nobility and peasants.

Each Paik was allotted two puras of arable land, known as ga-mati, free of charge, in return for his service to the state. However, the land belonged to the Khels, as such the Paik had no right to claim it as hereditary property. In case, a Paik died without leaving an heir, his share of land was forfeited to the Khel, to which he belonged.

### **Impact of the Paik System.**

Certain obligations were imposed upon the paiks by this system. For instance, they were not allowed to

pursue independent trade and, as a result, they could not improve their material conditions. However, they could obtain exemption from personal service by paying a commutation fee of Rs.3 per head per annum. In order to enjoy this privilege, some paiks borrowed money from well-to-do persons, but being unable return it, they became bondmen, and consequently, slaves. Some paiks bribed the officers to conceal their names while others took shelter in the Satras.

However, the paiks were treated as peasants, regardless of whether they pursued another craft or not. If they engaged in other occupation, taxes were realised based on the nature of the craft or profession. Thus tax was imposed at the rate of Rs. 5 on gold washers and brass workers, and Rs.3 oil-pressers and fishermen and at Rs.2 silk weavers. So it was thus clear that the professional Paiks were kept under strict royal supervision. As a result, the paik system became an obstacle to the growth of possible trade and professional development. Since professionals did not live as members of a professional community but as manual workers enrolled for profession under strict royal supervision, so the possibility of the emergence of functional guild was eliminated.

On the other hand, the paik system enabled the king to make maximum use of man-power both in times of war and peace. Moreover, the kingdom continue to thrive even during times of external danger, so it proved that the Paiks system was an effective weapon to fight against the external enemies. However, the Ahom king resorted to a policy of ruthless exploitation to meet the expenses of warfare construction and recruit more men into armed force as they had to fight against the Mughals and the rebellious chiefs. The officers of the lower rank were fully entrusted with the responsibility of meeting demands of the time, as there was no standing army or central administrative machinery system. Consequently, while some of these officers sided with the people against these exploitive paik system and many remain loyal to the king, leaving the people remain in a miserable condition. When Purnanda Buragohain realised the defective system and decided to raised a standing army, it was already too late. Meanwhile the people had begun to express their discontent silently during the war of resistance and their resentment eventually took the form rebellions under the leadership of emerging feudal lords or heads of the Satras.

## Conclusion

The introduction of the Paik system by the Ahom rulers brought considerable changes to the existing social, economic, and administrative structure of the Brahmaputra Valley during the medieval period. The Ahom rulers systematically engaged the entire human resource in the form of Paiks in state service. As the Paik system was strictly supervised by the state machinery, the way of life and material condition of the Paiks was largely determined by the state. However in reality, the Paiks were neither purely slaves nor complete royal peasant. Despite facing numerous challenges, the Ahom rulers were able to rule the entire region for nearly 600 years, through the systematic and strict enforcement of the Paik system. Over time, however, the system began to reveal many defects, and discontent silently grew among the people against the ruling class. This eventually led to revolt in the form of popular rebellions in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and became a major cause of the decline of the Ahom Kingdom.

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