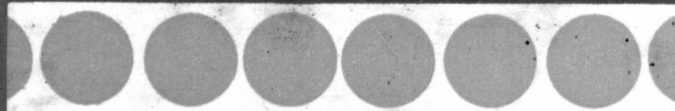


**THE HISTORY  
OF  
THE SYSTEM  
OF AHOM  
ADMINISTRATION**



●  
**LILA GOGOI**

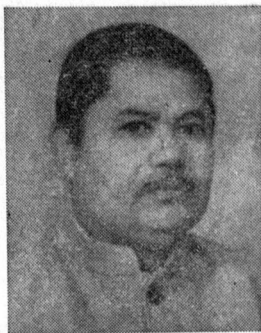
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### **About the Book**

The Tai-Ahoms, a branch of the great Tai race entered into the Brahmaputra Valley in the thirteenth century. They have their own language, script, literature and culture. They not only founded a strong Kingdom but also introduced a scientific system of administration. Dr. Lila Gogoi, formerly a Professor of Assamese, Dibrugarh University has compiled a few selected papers and the *History of the system of Ahom Administration* is an outcome of his sincere efforts.

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### **About the Author**

Dr. Lila Gogoi, M.A. Ph.D., formerly Professor of Assamese, Dibrugarh University and presently Director, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, is a erudite scholar and versatile author who has published more than 50 books on history of Assam, Assamese literature, history of culture and folklore. His two other outstanding works are : *'The Buranjis : Historical Literature of Assam'* and *'The Tai-Khamtis of North-East India'*. Both the works acclaimed high appreciation.

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AHOM ADMINISTRATION**

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THE SYSTEM OF  
AHOM ADMINISTRATION

*Compiled by*

**Dr. Lila Gogoi, M. A., Ph. D.**

Formerly Professor of Assamese,

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and Antiquarian Studies in Assam,

Guwahati



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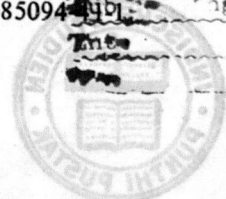
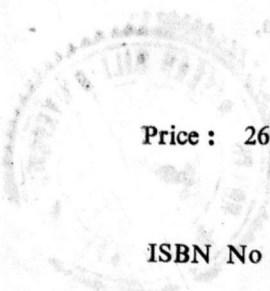
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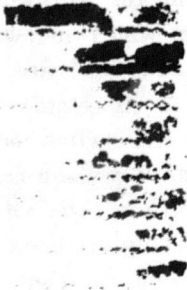
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Dedicated in the Sacred memory of the Late  
Bipin Kumar Bargohain, M. A., B. L. a symbol  
of Ahom nobility and catholicity.



## COMPILER'S A FEW WORDS

The Tai-Ahoms, Culturally and traditionally a very rich branch of the great Tai-race who live in Assam, but have their brethren in Burma, Yunnan, a Chinese province, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. The branch of the Tai who crossed the Patkai ranges towards the Brahmaputra Valley in the thirteenth Century naturalised their name as Ahom in Assam. They had their own language, script, cultural heritage religion and a kind of prosaic literature called *buranji*, the chronicles. They not only founded a strong kingdom but also introduced a scientific system of administration. Some papers have been written on the system of Ahom administration but no such comprehensive work or monograph is so far compiled and published. Long twenty years back I collected a few papers written by the different authors and scholars. When M/S Punthi-Pustak of Calcutta proposed to publish a book on this subject it was prepared hurriedly and sent to the press. Some mistakes have been crept in as I could not read proof personally. Anyway, I am grateful to the publisher M/S Punthi-Pustak.

I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to those writers and scholars from whom I have taken the extracts. Thanks are also due to my wife Mrs. Chandraprava Gogoi, and my daughters Miss Juri Gogoi, B. Sc. (Hons.) and Miss Lani Gogoi who stand constantly while preparing the manuscript. At the end, I owe my apology to the readers in general, and writers particularly, for any error that may have crept into the Volume, and expect necessary guidance and instruction to do further research on the topic and compile a comprehensive work in future.

25th April, 1991

Dibrugarh, Assam.

LILA GOGOI

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## CHAPTER I

*Suryya Kumar Bhuyan*

# THE ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM OF THE AHOMS

*Studies in the History of Assam, 1965 ; P-150*

The Ahoms are members of the Shan branch of the great Tai or Thai family of the human race. Sukapha who first conquered Assam in 1228 A. D. was a prince of the Shan state of Maulung in Upper Burma. The Ahoms ruled in Assam for six hundred years, till the year 1826, when the government of the kingdom passed into the hands of the East India Company by the Treaty of Yandabo. The territory first occupied by them was a small one, mainly confined to a portion of Eastern Assam, but it gradually extended westward ; and on the termination of the Mogul wars in 1682, it extended upto the river Manaha, opposite Goalpara. This limit remained unaltered till the end of Ahom rule in 1826. The kingdom was always known as Assam irrespective of the fluctuations in its dimensions.

The question has always been asked as to how it was possible for the Ahoms to continue in power for such a length of time. Their numerical strength was very much inferior to that of the conquered races, who belonged to different faiths and racial affinities, and spoke different languages. Lord William Bentinck, Governor-General of India, admitted that the fact that the government of the Ahoms continued for six centuries indicated that there must be something intrinsically good in the constitutions.

Two basic factors stand out prominently to explain the efficiency of the Ahom system of government. The rulers loved the country and their subjects with emotional fervour. They described Assam a sa casket to gold, *sonar saphura*, and they

would never allow any outsider to have a footing in the land, and any misdeed to tarnish its fair name. They were never dismayed by temporary discomfitures. "If the sun is once eclipsed, does it not make its appearance again?" was their motto in all measures of recuperation and rehabilitation. The ninety-seven-year old monarch Swargadeo Pratap Singha, sailed along the Dikhow river in a barge, baring his body, and bidding farewell to his subjects lined on both banks of the river. The assemblage in their turn offered to sacrifice one hundred stalwares from amongst them if by doing so they could renovate the king's failing health. His Grandson Swargadeo Jayadhvaj Singha wept bitter tears when he peeped through the gate of the capital city of Gargaon devastated by the Mogul invaders under Nawab Mir Jumla.

The success of the Ahoms was also due to their ability to take full advantage of the surroundings and circumstances in which they were placed, and adjust their administrative policy in accordance with the resources and opportunities of that set-up.

The Ahom kings were known by the appellation of Swargadeos, as their earliest ancestors were regarded as the sons of the great god Indra who came down from heaven in a golden ladder to redeem mankind from misery and injustice. There was thus a halo of divinity round the monarchs, and their person was always sacrosanct and inviolable. All honours and prerogatives emanated from the monarchs, and all superior appointments were made by them. Important cases, specially the records of trials involving capital offences, had to be submitted to them for final orders; and they alone could sanction the infliction of death penalties which required the shedding of blood. Elaborate instructions were given to the monarchs at the time of their coronation which combined the injunctions of the Ahom priestly code and of the Hindu Dandanitis.

The king's highest advisers were known under the collective

name of Patra-Mantri, consisting of the Bura-Gohain, Bar-Gohain, Barpatra-Gohain, Barbarua and Barphukan. Supreme decisions like the selection of monarchs and their disposal were taken by the three Gohains. The kings had to abide by the recommendations of the three Gohains, and their refusal to do so always led to complications. A tactful sovereign could bring the Gohains to his way of thinking by means of persuasion, and he was at liberty to exercise his prerogative of acting independently of the advice of the Gohains. He had then to fall back upon the support of the executive officers, the Phukans and the Baruas. The government was thus a combination of limited monarchy and oligarchy, and the balance of power was steadily and carefully maintained between the sovereigns and the nobles. Troubles came when there was a collision of interests, and the monarchs and the nobles exercised their power in excess of their limitations. The Gohains took the field when necessary, and all important matters like the construction of fortifications, and survey and settlement operations were carried out under their direct supervision.

The Barbarua was the chief executive officer and head of Judiciary, and as such he wielded great power. The records of all important trials came up to him for adjudication. He made arrangements for the king's coronation and for his itinerary. The Barphukan lived at Gauhati as viceroy, and he went up to the capital frequently for personal consultations with the king and the ministers. His office was a very important one as he had to face the first brunt of an attack from the west. The Rajkhowas were governors of specified areas. In times of war they marched to the battle at the head of the contingent composed of the levies in their jurisdiction. The harmony of the administration sprang from the symmetrical working of the different wings, and difficulties arose when one wing proved refractory or disloyal. The possibility of delinquency was reduced to a minimum as the movements and activities of every

paik and his immediate superiors were supervised by a gradation of officers.

The Ahoms harnessed every adult male in the service of the state as a labourer or a soldier. He was registered as a paik, and every four paiks constituted a squad known as a *got*. The paiks had to serve the government in turn, and the normal work of the absent paik had to be performed by his home-keeping comrades. Usually, one man out of the four had to be absent from home, sometimes two, and when emergencies came three men in a squad were employed in state service. Thus every able-bodied male subject of the kingdom acquired some elementary knowledge of the requirements of the state, and when he returned home after his allotted period of service he became a centre of political gossip in his village. Some degree of civic obligation was fostered by the system of rendering assistance to the normal work of the comrades absent from their homes on state service.

The levy of the first man in a squad was called a *mul*, of the second a *dowal* and of the third a *tewal*. The *mul* levy being on active service, the *dowal*, and the *tewal* remained ready in their villages for being called upon to report for duty at any time. An elaborate machinery was set up for maintaining a record of the paiks, and for filling up vacancies as occasions arose.

The concealment of a paik was considered to be a very serious offence. Twenty paiks were placed under an officer known as a Bora, a hundred under a Saikia, and a thousand under a Hazarika. The head of the unit under whom the paiks served was called a Barua; and sometimes a Phukan if the unit was of greater importance. Each unit was called a Khel; and the components of a Khel regarded themselves as members of one political fraternity.

The paik system of the Ahoms obviated the necessity of maintaining a huge army at the headquarters, as the non-serving paiks constituted a standing militia which could be mobi-

lised at a short notice by the Kheldar working through his subordinate officers. Some preliminary knowledge of his duties, civil and military, being implanted in each paiks by his previous service in the state, he had to undergo a brushing off or a refresher course at his allotted headquarter or the metropolis, combined with intensive training specially needed for the occasion. Only a signal had to be passed on to the Kheldar, and the machinery of mobilisation moved on space placing at the disposal of the government the requisite number of men as the occasion demanded. Some subjects enjoyed immunity from personal service if their absence from their villages caused dislocation to the normal life of the people. Government had not to resort to formal conscription as the services of the whole boby of adult effectives could be commanded in times of emergency.

The paiks were grouped on an occupational and territorial basis, and were attached to the several guilds of Khels, such as, the guilds of bow-makers, bow-shooters, gunpowder manufacturers, boat-pliers, boat-builders and boat-repairers, gold-washers, rice suppliers, supervisors of temples, etc. The paiks of a specified area were placed under a Rajkhowa who administered justice in his jurisdiction.

Assam extending to the foot of the hills on the north, east and south, is intersected by numerous streams which, after the monsoon rains and floods, leave a deposit of slit which makes the land extremely fertile, and capable of yielding a variety of crops. The rulers aimed that the vast tracts of arable lands should be cultivated, and their produce feed and maintain not only the population, but also the princes and noble and provide sufficient reserves for emergencies like wars and lean years. No one, not even the highest functionary was paid his salary in cash. A contingent of paiks or servitors was placed at his disposal who ploughed the fields, and produced the needed crops ; they also helped in furnishing the other necessaries to the household of their master. In emergencies rigorous

measures were instituted so that villagers would take to cultivation without any demur in order to produce the required quota of foodgrains. An officer when out of employment had to depend upon his family retainers, bondsmen and slaves, and his relatives and dependants. An ordinary paik who served the stue was given free of rent about three acres of land as his remuneration. A newly enthroned monarch had to perform the ceremony of sacrificial ploughing at the time of his coronation; and nobles and princes did not think it beneath their dignity if they ploughed in their fields. Several princes expressed the view that they were much happier in their villages where they earned their livelihood as ploughmen than when they were monarchs entangled in political controversies and machinations.

The Ahom attitude towards the tribesmen of the frontier was one of amity, accompanied by the application of force if the situation so demanded. The Ahoms realised that the chasing of tribal miscreants to the recesses of the hills was a fruitless endeavour: it was like "an elephant entering into a rat-hole." Regular blackmail was paid to the hillmen to prevent their foraging excursions into the plains. The blackmail consisted of articles of necessity to the tribes like clothes, metals and salt. Intercourse with the Nagas was conducted under the supervision of a number of local officers called Naga Katakis, who controlled the entrances and exits of the tribesmen. The conciliatory policy of the Ahoms made the hillmen their eternal friends, and all major operations like wars received the support of Assam's stalwart and martial neighbours.

The strategic frontiers of Assam were placed in charge of high-ranking wardens, recruited from the families of the Buragohain and the Bargohain. The Sadiya-khowa Gohan held the passers near Sadiya; the Solal Gohain lived in his headquarter at Biswanath or Kaliabar; the Jagiyalia Gohain with the Kacharis; and the Kajalimukhia Gohain lived at the mouth of the river Kapili to the east of Gauhati. The Raja of Darrang

was in charge of the relation with Bhutan ; and the Duaria Barua, stationed at Hadirachoki, with Bengal. The Barphukan, or the Ahom viceroy at Gauhati, was in overall charge of frontier relations to the west of Assam. He also dealt with the relations with the Muslim power in Bengal, and, later on with the affairs of the East India Company. Of course, all matters of importance were communicated to the king and his ministers, and the Barphukan acted in accordance with the instructions received from the capital.

The Ahom attitude towards the entrance of outsiders from the west of their kingdom was one of extreme caution. Hordes of invaders, both Afghan and Mogul, had entered Assam through Bengal, and they had to be resisted with all might. Westerners were therefore looked upon with suspicion, as they had a separate political loyalty, and the exact purpose of their visit could not be ascertained at all times. But Assam wanted men to work in several avocations,—accountants, artizans, architects and mechanics, and their introduction was freely encouraged, provided they settled in Assam for good, and did not return to their homeland. All possible facilities were given to them for their permanent residence in Assam by granting them lands and servitors. These new-comers were gradually assimilated with the original inhabitants, and their descendants did not suffer any disability for their extraterritorial descent.

Punishments were inflicted in a very exemplary and rigorous manner. A traitor was punished by execution which in many cases extended to the leading members of the family. The common punishments were—extraction of eyes and kneecups, slicing off of noses and ears, throwing into water, hammering by clubs, hanging by a hook, pressure between two wooden cylinders, and hoeing from head to foot. The severest form of execution consisted in cutting off slices from the body before final decapitation. Crimes were perceptibly reduced as

the people lived in perpetual dread of the inevitable consequences of the violation of law and order.

The first batch of Ahom conquerors numbered only a few thousand stalwarts. But the original fold was gradually reinforced by the introduction of the members of the subject races. The new entrants enjoyed all the privileges of the original Ahoms when they proved worthy of them. The Ahoms thus became in course of time a cosmopolitan entity. The steel frame of the administration was however confined to the descendants of the companion of Sukapha. The elevation of new entrants to high offices on doubt caused at first some chagrin in the camp of the older Ahoms, though resistance melted down as the new-comers distinguished themselves by their loyalty, gallantry and success in the diplomatic field. The Ahoms were free from caste prejudices, and what appealed to them was a finely built body, some amount of dash, and a sense of probity and quick decision.

A very large majority of the people of Assam were Hindus, and the Ahom religious cult was a different feature altogether. The Ahoms gradually adopted Hindu customs and manners, although a large number still adhered to their original Shan faith. The rulers adopted a definite policy of non-interference and tolerance. Not being aware of the full implications of the Hindu faith they looked askance at any innovation in that faith fearing that such an innovation might be followed by a commotion in the land. Hindu institutions received liberal patronage from the Ahom sovereigns. They erected Hindu temples, endowed lands and paiks for perpetual worship in those temples, and also in the Vaisnava monasteries. They also continued to respect Ahom customs; and Ahom priests were held in high reverence till the end. Muslim priests and preachers were given due honour and lands were bestowed on them to enable them to carry on their devotional functions in easy and comfort. This religious neutrality, and encouragement of the faiths prevailing in the land accounted for the long popu-

larity of Ahom rule in Assam. Trouble came when an Ahom queen in her zeal for Saktism offended a very powerful Vaisnava pontiff who had a numerous and united body of disciples.

The Ahoms brought with them their manuscripts dealing both with religious and secular matters. But the knowledge of their literary treasures became gradually confined to the members of the priestly order, the Deodhais, Bailungs and Mohans, and the higher aristocracy. The Ahom language was used on ceremonial occasions like worship of the deities and coronations. It was also used in some copper-plates and coins. Knowledge of the language had to be maintained because the Ahoms continued their intercourse with the Shans of Upper Burma till the end of their rule. From the stray glimpses that we have got of Ahom literary remains they seem to be rich in astrological treatises and chronicles. Lexicons from Assamese to Ahom and vice-versa were also compiled; and the Ramayana story was also rendered to the Ahom language.

But the use of Ahom as spoken language gradually became obsolete, and the rulers found it convenient to use the medium of the local inhabitants in their daily intercourse. The princes and the nobles become patrons of Assamese writes; and several monarchs wrote songs in Assamese, and one of them wrote a drama. Hindu scholars and poets flourished in the Ahom court, and produced works which have enriched the literature of the Assamese. The adoption of the Assamese language as the medium of social intercourse with the inhabitants made them feel that the rulers were one with them, and they never felt for a moment that they were being governed by outsiders. In fact, in the beginning of Ahom rule in Assam the inhabitants freely admitted that though the conquerors had come from a far country they liked to meet them frequently on account of their affable and endearing manners.

One of the greatest contributions made by the Ahoms to the culture of the Assamese people was the custom of compiling

chronicles, which were first written in the Ahom language, and subsequently in both Assamese and Ahom. All political transactions were recorded in the chronicles of Buranjis, and they were mostly compiled under official auspices to serve as precedents. But deeds and good ones were scrolled with impartiality, as the authors enjoyed immunity from vengeance or reward because the chronicles "were preserved with the utmost secrecy, and the devulsion of the facts recorded there was considered as an insult shown to one's mother. The scope of the historical literature of Assam was not confined to the four corners of the kingdom; it extended to the neighbouring races, and tribes, and the states of India with which Assam had some sort of political relations. There were monographs dealing with the Muslim rulers of Delhi, as their knowledge was an essential prerequisite to the successful implementation of war measures.

Besides the Buranjis, books containing useful information were compiled under official direction. Assam is the land of elephants which were used on ceremonial occasions, and also for commercial purposes and wars. The subject of inspired numerous treatises of varying length and treatment. These were treatises also on horses, hawks, fortifications, construction of temples and tanks, and the order of precedence of the nobles and officers. The Ahoms reduced all useful knowledge into writing so that each department of the government could have a staff manual for ready reference.

The Ahoms as a sovereign power have ceased to exist since the year 1826, but visible traces of their rule still exist in different forms. The common Assamese titles,—Gohain, Phukan, Barua, Rajkhowa, Hazarika, Saikia, Bara, Kakati, Katakai, Bujar-Barua, Bardoloi, Neog, Patowari, and Choudhury—are still used by the descendants of the original holders of the respective offices. Land-grants made by the Ahom monarchs are still enjoyed by the successor individuals institutions. Worship is still going on in the temples erected by the Ahom rulers. The

tanks excavated under their orders are still used as water reservoirs and fisheries, and their highways traversed by thousand of travellers till this day. The khel system so much in vogue during the Ahom age still influence the social order of the Assamese people. All this shows how intimately and extensively the impact of the Ahoms had permeated the country and masses.

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