

Formation of the Ahom State :

The origin and growth of the pyke system
and Ahom Feudalism in Mediaeval Assam

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1. Introduction

The functional and structural growth in any state system largely depends upon the way in which man-power/human resources are utilised. The *Pyke* system was very substantial in this process of growth in the emergence of the Ahom state. So far the studies on the *pyke* system have been confined only to the organisational aspects and its accompanying ramifications. Its total socio-political and dynamic impacts in the appearance of the Ahom state still remain to be focussed fully. In this paper a brief attempt is made to trace the origin and growth of the *pyke* system leading to a feudal character of the Ahom state in mediavel Assam.

How did the *pyke* system originate ? Was it in the bog of an ecology both human and natural or was it in the travails of a conquest society after the Ahom conquest of Upper Assam ? What was the role of the *pyke* system in the rise of the Ahom state ? How far is it related to the Southeast Asian legacy of the Ahoms ? Was the Ahom state actually a feudal one or was it literally a forced labour state, socage or liturgic state as the *pyke* system itself would suggest ? Our attempt here is to find some of the answers of these pertinent questions with our limited knowledge besides the limitations of time and space. Hence, only a fringe of the problems has been touched here admitting the fact that the entire issues involve an in-depth study to be followed.

Studies on the state formations is a complex issue varied in point of time and space. In fact, even if all the records of it are available, it would not be possible to say as to when the state was exactly born. Further, the origin of

the state is seen as multiple feed back system in which pre-state polities in various situations respond to the selective pressures by changing some of their internal structures or by subduing a competing group, or by establishing themselves dominant in a region or by gaining control of the water resources etc., which produce a chain of reactions in other changes that leads ultimately, whatever might be the beginning, to the same end -the state².

Finally, we admit that the complexity of the vastness of the material appears as the biggest problem in historical research³. As such, it is not unlikely that there would be lapses galore in this attempt and the learned gathering here would kindly consider to remove those lapses.

II. The Origin and growth of the Pyke System

For a better appreciation of the growth of the Ahom state structure it is necessary to look into the evolution of the *pyke* system. Unfortunately, neither in the extant chronicles handed down to us, nor in the accounts of the historians or writers till date we can trace any light with regard to its origins and development. Say for example, the word *pyke* does not find its place in the early accounts narrated in the chronicles, nor in the Ahom *Lexicons*. How and when the same has come into use in later accounts is also not indicated at all. Whether it would be an original Tai-Ahom word or Assamese word, is not easily known. Any how, the *pyke* system was a unique devise in the utilisation of human labour resources for productions and exploititions. Because it happened to be the core of all the revenue resources, the entire militia, the productive organs and the public services on which the Ahom state was born and subsequently grew up. It is likely that its origin was rooted in the Tai heritage of Southeast Asia and the Ahoms just extended it with further

elaboration in Assam. Therefore, it might be worth rewarding if we start out enquiry from its Southeast Asian roots. We refer here to some of the works of the Thai/Tai/Vietnamese ethnologists. One such work mentions:⁴

The first form of exploitation practised by the ruling nobles consist in utilising the prisoners of war to cultivate the paddy fields. These paddy fields are then called *na cuong* (cuong paddy fields), because these are cultivated by prisoners who have become *cuong* or servants of noble houses. Another part of the prisoners of war who have been assigned to the works of the house of the *tao*, have become *con hu'o'n* (man of the house or domestic servant). As the number of the prisoners increased ..., the *tao* is found obliged to allow the *cuong* to establish himself separately and clear a plot of rice field for cultivation. For this fact, the *cuongs* are designated by a new name - the *puas* or *pais* (those who live separately)....Afterwards the *con Hu'o'n* are furnished with not only the prisoners of war but also every person who is not in a position to repay the debts by the condemned, by persons without shelter etc. The *Cuongs*, *puas*, *pais* are then for the most part Thais. They are exempted from the corvee of the *muong* but they are obliged to perform the agricultural work and the corvee of the aristocratic class. The later takes as *cuongs* the entire hamlets. These new *cuongs* are called *nhocs*. Essentially, the *cuong* and *nhoc* designate the same thing but *cuong*, *pua* and *pai* are ancient *cuongs* whereas *nhocs* are new *cuongs*...Outside the *uong* paddy field, the aristocratic class invents other categories of paddy fields like the *na bo't*, *na bo't tao*, *na cam* (reserved paddy fields, paddy fields set apart) to allocate these to the important nobles and

to the members of the nobility who do not perform any official function...

This then is general picture of the evolution of the labour utilisation processes in the Thai/Tai system. From a prisoner's status, some of them became Thais, through the Thaisation process. In course of time, they appeared as a separate class as the *puas* or *pais*. It is not unlikely that the term *pyke* could have been derived from the *puas* or *pais* since a similar situation is also discernible in case of the Ahoms when later the subjugated Morans and Borahis admitted to such orders through an Ahomisation process. Moreover, the several thousand commoners who accompanied Sukapha along with their chiefs and nobles, might have been no other than these *pais*. Under new circumstances and in later sophistications in Assam, it evolved itself into an inalienable *pyke* system of the Ahom state. Thus the origin of the whole system may be traced back to its Southeast Asian roots of the Tai-Ahoms.

The nature of migration of this group of Tais to Assam in the 13th century produced new circumstances. The migrants were in search of a new homeland to settle permanently and when they landed themselves in the valley of upper Assam, they realised that this could be possible only through conquests, subjugations and absorptions of the different groups of people that they encountered. Therefore, the several thousand *pais* or commoners had to be armed which eventually formed the militia and the productive forces as well. This double function combined into one, was the essence of the *pyke* system. In their new homeland which they named as 'Mungdunshunkham' (the land full of golden gardens), they all came to be known as Ahoms. Gradually and in course of time, with the extension of the territory and subjugated groups were accommodated in the *kanri pyke* along with the ordinary Ahom commoners while

the free Ahom commoners, mostly related to the aristocracy, were grouped as *chamua pykes*. The emerging *pyke* classification under the Ahoms closely resembles to the process of growth of the *puas, pais* of Southeast Asia on a broad plane. The institutionalisation of the *khel/mel* systems based on the utilisation of the *pyke* services by the members of the ruling groups came out of this *pyke* syndrome, since *pykes* were also considered as an inalienable property of the ruling Ahom aristocracy. In course of time, the number of *khels* ran into some ninety while *mels* were also extended to the princesses known as *Kunwarimels*.⁵ Thus the process as a whole was in the interest of the ruling class leading to the necessity of the state.

As regards the details of the organisation, function and structure of the *pyke* system, we would skip it over for fear of mere repetitions⁶ as the same has been fully essayed by other scholars. What we would emphasise here, is the importance of the *pyke* system as a prime factor in the formation of the Ahom state. The system suggests the inborn stratifications in the Ahom society. The apparent form of military democracy was the natural outcome of this system since Assam was held as their joint conquest. Therefore, the Ahom state was not totally an early state but it appears to be a secondary one. What it lacked was a bounded territory and a sufficient number of population. When these were attained, the system burst into statehood, in which the *pyke* system continued to be the backbone of the entire Ahom state structure and organisation. To understand it better, we would have to look into the nature and character of feudalism in the Ahom state.

Ahom feudalism and the Pyke system

Feudalism in the conventional way, is mostly understood in an occidental concept. In its oriental

context too, the general tendency is to look at it with an occidental eye and that is how J.P.Wade, S.K.Bhuyan and Amalendu Guha have subscribed their views on Ahom feudalism.

Feudalism in its Southeast Asian context, which has got a great deal of relevancy in case of the Ahoms, is the system of economic and socio-political organisation founded upon the bonds between man and man, in which a class of specialist warriors, i.e., the nobles one subordinate to another by a hierarchy of bonds of dependence dominate and control a mass of peasants who cultivate the land and make them live. George Condominas has brought this very fact to light in his analysis of Thai feudalism. In a historical perspective, he has drawn a comparison between the Khmer empire with that of the Germanic barbarians who destroyed the Roman empire and says that the southeast Asian context differs a great deal, ¹⁰ from that presented by Western Europe of that time

Jacob C.Van Leur, the Dutch sociologist, has also drawn a perceptive characterisation of the southeast Asian situation which would be worth quoting in understanding the rationale of Ahom feudalism:

...mass domestication made possible by river and canal irrigation farming formed the basis for control of the population by officialdom of the ruler. All subjects were required to render service to the authority, and that service was organised and directed bureaucratically by an administrative apparatus. The chief role of the cities was that of being royal seats -... in which levies in kind were brought together from the whole country, and royal store houses in which the levies were stocked and from which the host of officials, the army and the royal household were provided. The same system was used for lower administra-

tive units. Large scale planned projects of agrarian colonisation were undertaken and with the services of the subjects monumental building activities were accomplished. They were forced labour states, socage states or liturgical states. The legal status of the agrarian population could vary from that of serfs and slaves brought into the state by predatory wars, purchase or subjugation and established in agrarian colonies

Perhaps, this is just enough to show the difference between the Western and Southeast Asian situations. Besides, while treating the problems of power the essential difference between the occidental and oriental views of feudalism appears clearly. In the occidental view, the territory, its surface and its borders play an essential role while in the orientalist's view, it is the control of the labour force which matters most. Marx therefore, in the oriental context, has termed it as the 'Asiatic mode of production' characterising its lack of private ownership of land and complete subjugation of the individual peasant accounting to a basic unchangeableness of the Asian societies.

It is true, Ahom feudalism had no private property in land. There was the complete subjugation of the *pykes* who constituted the greatest majority of the population between the two strata - the nobles, the aristocracy and the bureaucracy on the one hand, and the *pykes*, *logua-likchow*, *bandi-beti*, on the other. It is also true that the *pyke* system accounted for the basic unchangeableness in the Ahom state because the system became so inbuilt that it blocked all the ways to other modes of production leading to a diversified economy. Yet it is difficult to ascribe the concept of western feudalism including even that of Marx of its evolution from slavery to feudalism. Because,

slavery did not develop here as it was in the Greek-Roman cases. Because, the *pykes* were neither freemen nor slaves. It was not slave power but socage which provided all the necessary man-power both for securing surplus, for making the militia, and above all, for the construction of huge tanks, roads and ramparts, the massive temples and the eye-catching burial mounds of the Ahom monarchs. In the Asian situation, this was the general characteristic that where irrigated wet rice agriculture was present, the construction of huge temples and monuments took place. However, in the Ahom state, the basic unchangeableness of Marx or the apparent stagnancy in the other modes of production might have been due to the contradictions within the Ahom social system or they were at the cross road of cultural currents provided by the Hindu and Islamic culture contacts.

The evolutionary process of the *pyke* system witnessed at least three factors operating in it. Firstly, it led to the birth of a paternal bureaucracy as a measure of reconciling the internal contradictions within the ruling class; secondly, it led to the birth of the coercive authority and thirdly, there was a clear manifestation of ruling class interest *vis-a-vis* the state leading to the cementing of the *Pyke system*: the *pyke* labour now becoming an inalienable property of the nobility and the bureaucracy. The process began with the reign of Suhummung Dihingia Raja (1497-1539). Royal appanages were set up in several places, organised into clans/*phoids* based on the territorial division of labour and village units were also set up within these under the Phukans and Rajkhowas¹² which marked the beginning of the growth of a bureaucracy.

Initially, all the free ahom commoners were under the direct control of the king. By the end of the 14th century, a new arrangement was made with two separate divisions, one each under the Buragohain and the Borgohain¹³ who

now commanded the free Ahom commoners while the king retained the non-Ahom commoners. When the office of the Barpatragohain was created increasing the number of ministers in the council from two to three and effecting a significant change in the constitutional structure, the non-Ahom commoners were allotted to him since the other two Gohains refused to part with their free Ahom commoners¹⁴. Besides, when the posts of the two frontier governors were created, these were exclusively reserved for the lineage group kin members of the two Gohains. The allotment of the number of *pykes* to these privileged offices signified wealth, status and power. As such, this was a measure to reconcile some of the internal conflicts within the ruling nobility at the expense of the *pyke* labour which provided the exploitative avenues to them.

So far the free Ahom commoners were yet to be subjected to coercion.¹⁵ But with the extension of the territory and the increase in population; more warfares, and the need to have more surplus to maintain the pace of growing ruling class interest, the situation could not remain the same as before. A new arrangement, a rationalisation of the *pyke* system became imperative which led to the birth of the coercive authority. By the end of the reign of Suklenmung Garganya Raja (1539-1552), the *pykes* were organised into *gots* of four adult males who were to render compulsory service to the state for one year in turn by each in return for an approximately 2.66 acres of wet rice land on usufruct basis¹⁶. The ramifications of the *pyke* system resulted in the organisation of the *Khel/Mel* units based on functional, professional and sometimes even on territorial basis, placed each under lineage based kin group heads. The entire state structure now rested on the utilisation of man-power in the interest of the state *vis-a-vis* the ruling class. The process continued to accelerate during the reign of Susengpha Pratap Singha (1603-1641). Two more important offices that of the Barbarua and the

Barphukan raising the number of ministers in the council to five, came into existence. The *pyke* militia had to be reformed. An elaborate bureaucratic machinery was set up with civil cum military officials like the Neogs, Rajkhowas, Hazarikas, Saikias, and the Boras with all the perquisites and privileges at the cost of the *pyke* labour.

From the foregoing analysis, perhaps, it can well be said that the emerging nature of Ahom feudalism was not the feudalism as it is generally understood. The local variants are widely diffused here. Here the on growing social transformations were largely determined by the agro-hydraulic character of the Ahom society. Thus following Wittfogel, we can say that it was a kind of agro-managerial despotism since it is essential and specific to agro-hydraulic societies, where corvee labour is imposed on the mass of the population of the state and it is in this context that it differs from feudalism.¹⁸

There appears no difference between the corvee labour of the west and the *pyke* labour of the Ahoms. In Ahom's case, this was ossified into the on growing Ahom polity leading to the growth of a hierarchical structure pyramydic in form. It became the backbone of the whole Ahom structural growth institutionalising the unequal access to the resources. It was the impeccable factor in the growth and consolidation of the Ahom state. The existence of the state depended so much so on it that when the system crumbled, the state edifice faced collapse too.

The *pyke* system was instrumental in giving birth to a broad agri-based society and in later times, it became a class by itself since all the commoners except a handful of ruling groups, were put into the same basket of *pyke* labourers it had some unique developments in the sense that it knew no caste or creed cementing the unification of *pykes* as a class of agricultural

labourers. Because of this trend of development, the notions like '*Raijei Raja* (Govt. by the people), *Raijei Nakh Jukarile Noi boi* (Rivers flow at the direction of the finger nails of the people), developed in later times with far-reaching impacts in the Ahom state.

Notes & References

1. 'Conquest society' here means a society in which the conquerors neither liquidate nor expel the native population and decide to live permanently in the land they have taken possession of, and when they are sufficiently numbered to establish a cohesive and distinct alien ruling body apart from and above their new subjects. See, Karl A. Wittfogel, **O r i e n t a l Despotism**, New haven, London, 1957, p.325.
2. R. Cohen and Elman R. Service, eds., **The Origins of the State, The Anthropology of Political Evolution**. Institute for the study of Human Issues (ISHI), Philadelphia, 1978, p.14.
3. Elias H. Tuma, **Economic History and Social Science**, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971, p.145.
4. The work is of Cam Trong and Hu'u U'ng, the two Vietnamese ethnologists: cited by George Condominas, 'Essay on the Evolution of the Thai Political System', in: **Ethnos**, Volume 41: I-IV, Ethnographical Museum of Sweden, Stockholm, 1976, pp.21-22.
5. See for the details of the **Khel/mel** systems, S.Rajkumar, **Itihashe soara Chashata Bachar**, published by A. Rajkumari, Jorhat-1, 1980, pp.81ff, 174ff. Also see Hiteswar Barbarua, **Ahomor Din**, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati 1981, p.431 & p.498.

6. E.Gait, S.K. Bhuyan and Amalendu Guha, in their works, have already profusely dealt with the essence, dynamics and the ramifications of the **pyke** system. We have added only the aspects related to our thematic study.
7. With regard to the secondary state formation, Barbara J.Price has observed, '...it is evident that studies of secondary states are often uncritically atleast implicitly, retrodicted into pristine situations, thus raising questions of epistemological legitimacy. 'For details, see Barbara J.Price, 'Secondary State formation', in:Cohen & Service,n.2,p.161.
8. Amalendu Guha, 'The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam: 1228-1714', **Occasional Paper No.64**, CSSS, Calcutta, Oct., 1983,p.9 & p.39.
9. Jacques Le Goff, cited by George Condominas, n.4,p.41.
10. George Condominas, n.4,p.40.
11. Jacob C.Van Leur, **Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History**, The Hague, Van Hoeve, 1955,pp.56-57.
12. Harakanta Barua Sadaramin, **Asom Buranji**, S.K. Bhuyan, ed.,DHAS, Guahati, 2nd edn., 1962,p.25.
P.Gogoi, **The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms**, G.U.,1968,p.283,
13. This took place during the reign of Subinpha (1281-1293). **Deodhai Asom Buranji**,S.K.Bhuyan, ed.,DHAS,2nd Edn.,1962,p.103.E.Gait, **History of Assam**, LBS., Guwahati, Third Edition (Reprint), 1984,p.80.
14. **Satsori Asom Buranji**, ed., S.K.Bhuyan,

G.U.,Edn.,1974,p.13. Hiteswar Barbarua, n.5,pp.46-47.

The two Gohains were definitely against the creation of the post of the third minister in the Borpatragohain. However, the king argued that kingship is the golden platter, and the two Gohains were the two silver posts and hence a third one was necessary. Therefore, to reconcile the two disaffected Gohains, when the posts of two frontier governors were created, these new offices were exclusively given to the lineages of the two Gohains. Also see Amalendu Guha, n.8,p.29.

15. During the reign of Subinpha (1281-1293), the Borgohain had to give up his office in disgust since he failed to maintain the elephant allotted to him because the free Ahom commoners could not be coerced to supply the grass needed for the elephant. "The Ahoms bring grass if they please, otherwise not".(trans ours) See **Deodhai Asom Buranji**, n.13,p.103.
16. Amalendu Guha, 'Land Rights and Social Classes in Medieval Assam' **Bulletin of Gokhale Institute**, Poona, Vcl.III, No.3, 1966, pp.217-234. Guha has already highlighted the dynamics of the **pyke** system.
17. For details on the organisational aspects, see, P.Gogoi, & E.Gait, n.13, p.551 & p. 239 respectively.
18. Karl A.Wittfogel, n.1,pp.414-15.