

**TĀI ĀHOM
SYSTEM
OF
GOVERNMENT**



AMULYA CHANDRA SARMA

The *Āhoms* formed a section of the great *Tāi* race. They founded a kingdom in the early part of the thirteenth century and ruled Assam for nearly six hundred years. They could do so because of their peculiar system of government.

The present work is an attempt to study the norms and forms of the government of the *Āhoms* with special reference to public personnel administration. A study of this system provided many ideas on administration having great relevance to the modern times. Beginning with tracing the history of the *Āhoms*, the author proceeds to depict various ways and means of the *Āhom* administration and concludes with a comparative analysis of the then government with the present.

Dr. Amulya Chandra Sarma (born 1934) is veritably a scholar of Political Science. His theses on the *Tāi Āhom* System of Government received high appreciation from renowned academicians. The author is currently a lecturer at the Jorhat College, Assam. He has several articles and papers to his credit.

SUBJECT HEADINGS

Assam-History

Political Science-Assam

Public Administration-Assam

ISBN 81-7018-103-8

BRPC
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A.C. SARMA



1986

B.R. PUBLISHING CORPORATION

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ISBN 81-7018-103-8

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Published by Pradeep Mittal for B.R. Publishing Corporation at 461, Vivekanand Nagar, Delhi-110052.
Distributed by D.K. Publishers' Distributors at 1, Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110002. Phone: 278368.
Printed at Shanti Composing Agency, Delhi-110053.

PRINTED IN INDIA

PREFACE

An attempt has been made in this book to study the Āhom system of government with special reference to public personnel administration.

The Āhoms, formed a section of the great Tāi race. They founded a kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley in the early part of the thirteenth century and ruled Assam for nearly six hundred years. This they could do because of their peculiar system of government, having the intrinsic value of its own. There are only two states in India, which can boast of inheriting their written history. One is Kashmir and the other is Assam. The Āhoms from the time of Sukāphā had maintained a written history of their own which they called Buranji. The meaning of the word Buranji is not exactly 'history' as understood in English. 'Bu' is 'fool', 'ran' means 'education' and 'ji' stores. Therefore, Buranji means a store of teachings for the 'fools', meaning thereby history and knowledge, or more exactly, chronicles. A student of the Constitutional History of Assam will find a mine of information in these Buranji. The early English travellers and military personnel of the East India Company left for us many accounts of the Āhom kingdom and these form the valuable source materials. One can derive many important lessons from the working of the Āhom system of government. A study of this system provides us many ideas on administration having some relevance to the present time.

The name of the State Assam came to be used only after

(iv)

the conquest of Saumar by Sukāphā, the Shan conqueror. The government and administration introduced by the section of Tāi or Shans in Assam was novel to the people of the land. There are certain aspects of the government which need closer examination. Since the government and administration of the Āhom times was based on the composition of the society, it is necessary to proceed from the base rather than from the top. The history of the period of Āhom supremacy must need be referred, at some length, if only, to familiarise one with the peculiarities of the Āhom system. This has been taken care of in the first chapter—the historical background covering six centuries of Āhom rule. Sukāphā founded the Āhom kingdom in Assam and made himself king. From the time of Sukāphā, the race ruled over Brahmaputra valley for about six hundred years. But the expansion of the kingdom actually took place in the reign of Suhungmung alias Dihingīā Raja. The Kāmṛp district had been finally annexed, during the reign of Udayaditya Singha, after the Mughals were expelled from it.

In the first chapter is traced the history of the Āhom kingdom from A.D. 1228 to A.D. 1826. This historical background will show how the Āhoms had founded their kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley and gradually expanded it towards the west and the south. In the second chapter, an attempt has been made to show the nature of government and the organisation of the administrative areas. Practice of secularism and religious toleration was a characteristic of the Āhom rule. In the third chapter, the social composition which was the basis of the governmental system has been fully dealt with. As was the custom in the old world, there was slavery in the Āhom domains, but slavery was not imposed as a form of punishment. In the fourth chapter, details of kingship have been discussed with a view to tracing out the positions, powers and functions of this office. The king was the pivotal point of the Āhom administrative set-up. All orders without exception emanated from him. At the same time, ministers also held very respectable and responsible positions. The Patra-mantri or the Council of Five was the principal advisory and executive body in the kingdom. In the fifth chapter, occurs an elaborate discussion of the Council. Three categories of local governors appear to have been appointed under Āhom

rule. The governors thus appointed were responsible for the administration and security of the areas assigned to them. It appears that no definite principle was adopted in matters of creating the offices of the local governors. In the sixth chapter the nature of work of these officers and their functions are dealt with.

In the Āhom system of government, the organisation of the subordinate executive appeared to be a combination of both Āhom and non-Āhom elements. It is not easy to classify these officers. A considerable number of offices was brought into existence for the performance of religious and semi-religious duties. An attempt has been made in the seventh chapter to analyse how these officers discharged their duties. In the eighth chapter there is a discussion of the judicial administration. As a matter of fact the judicial machinery introduced by the Āhom rulers had suffered from certain defects in the absence of codified rules for deciding the disputes. In ninth, tenth and eleventh chapters, the lawmaking procedure, land revenue system and foreign relation have been discussed. There was no law making procedure as is in modern times, but customs and conventions played a very important role. In the sphere of land revenue, the Āhoms made a departure from other parts of India. Rendering of physical service in lieu of cash payment of revenue was a distinctive feature of the Āhom system of government. Like all powerful Monarchs, the Āhom Monarchs for their part made all efforts to establish alliance and friendship with powerful neighbours. From time to time, they pursued a foreign policy conducive to the defence of the land as well as elevation of the kingdom to the status of a first ranking power.

Public works under the Āhom rule were not neglected. The softer arts of peace like art, architecture and literature found a fertile soil to develop. The government maintained a separate department to deal with public works of importance. Roads, tanks and stone bridges constructed during the Āhom period have survived to the present time. The religious policy of the Āhom rulers anticipated modern secularism. These matters are dealt with in the twelfth chapter. A study of governmental system is incomplete unless a comparison is

made with reference to the present. This has been done in the thirteenth chapter.

It is true that the Āhoms left for posterity many chronicles dealing with their rule. But these chronicles were basically confined to the event leading to the rise and fall in the system of their power politics. These are scanty references to the system of government or administrative procedure adopted by them. The chronicles or Buranjis were usually written in strips of Sanchi bark (*Aquilaria Agallocha*, known in Bengal as Agar) in both Assamese and Āhom language. Some of these Buranjis have since been published under the authority of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Government of Assam. However, these Buranjis are in some respects deficient. Therefore, we have to depend on the accounts left by the Mohammedan and the European travellers, together with epigraphic, numismatic and other records of contemporary age. There are also secondary sources. We have records compiled by early English rulers of East India Company and Assamese scholars of the early part of nineteenth century. The records compiled by the military generals of East India Company furnish us with a good deal of information. The Carit puthis or biographic and other literary work of the period in question, furnish us with additional materials. It must, however, be noted, that for a fuller treatment of the subject, materials are still wanting.

I am really grateful to the authority of Gauhati University for permitting me undertake this investigation. The following persons connected with different libraries and institutions were helpful to me in collecting materials for this study. Librarian, Central Library Gauhati; Officer-in-charge of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati; Sri B.C. Sarma, Librarian, Government Library, Tezpur; Sri D. Sarma, Librarian J. B. College Library; Sri A. Barua, Librarian, Kirti Chandra Library, Baligaon, Jorhat; Sri Nanda Bordoloi, Office Secretary, Asom Sahitya Sabha; Sri M.C. Neog, Vice-Principal, Majuli College; Sri R.K. Barua, D.C., Sibsagar; and Sri A. Rajkhowa, Asom Sahitya Sabha. I thank all these persons for the assistance received from them. My thanks are also due to Sri D. Sarma, Lecturer, J.B. College, Sri H.K. Neog, Sri G.S. Neog, Sri (Mrs) U.K. Rahman, Sri M. Bhattacharyya,

Sri P. Sabhapondit (all lecturers, Jorhat College) for their assistance in obtaining rare books and magazines. I take this opportunity of extending my thanks and gratitude to Sri Arum Chandra Phukan, Amolapatty, Sibsagar, for allowing me to handle the manuscript Buranji of his great-grand-father Padmeswar Nawbaichā Phukan. In this connection, I must also acknowledge the valuable advice received from Āhom scholar and historian, Sjt. Bhuban Handique, Sibsagar and Sanskrit scholar, Sri Bhaba Krishna Misra, Jorhat. Three of my brothers, Dr. S.N. Sarma, Gauhati University, Sri T.N. Sarma, ex-Principal and ex-President, Asom Sahitya Sabha and Sri B.N. Sarma, Judge, Gauhati High Court helped me with materials and valuable advice. I thank then all. I also acknowledge the assistance received from my wife Srimati Bulbuli Sarma in preparing the fair copy for type and my thanks are also due to Sjt. Indra Nath Borgohain Typist, who took much care in typing out the copy for the press.

Last but not the least, is the help received in very many ways from Dr. D.P. Barooah, Professor and Head of the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, under whose supervision this thesis has been prepared. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to him.

Amulya Chandra Sarma

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
Preface	(iii)
Abbreviations	(xi)
<i>Chapter</i>	
I. Historical background	1
II. System of Government	33
III. Structure of Society	51
IV. The King—Head of the State	70
V. The Āhom Administrative Hierarchy— The Council, Ministers and Officers	88
VI. Local Administration and Governors	126
VII. Subordinate Executive	146
VIII. Administration of Justice	212
IX. Legislation	222
X. Revenue Administration	227
XI. Foreign Relations	255
XII. Public Works, Coinage and Religion	278
XIII. A Comparative Study of Āhom System and Modern System	314
XIV. Conclusion	323
Appendix	342
Glossary	354
Bibliography	361
Index	367

ABBREVIATIONS

A.S.S.	: Assam Sahitya Sabha
J.A.C.T.A.	: <i>Journal of Assam College Teachers' Association</i>
J.A.R.S.	: <i>Journal of Assam Research Society</i>
Mills' Report	: Mills : <i>Report on the Province of Assam, 1854</i>
T.B.	: <i>Tungkhungia Buranji</i>
Asom Buranji (Sukumar)	: <i>Asom Buranji</i> obtained from Sukumar Mahanta family
Harakanta	: Harakanta Sadar Amin
D.H.A.S.	: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam
M.S. Buranji	: <i>Manuscript Buranji</i>
S.A.B.	: <i>Satsari Asom Buranji</i>
K.B.	: <i>Kachari Buranji</i>
Eastern India	: Martin: <i>History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India, 1838</i>

CHAPTER XIV

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the Chapter-I, 'Āhom' is a local name given to the group of Tāi people, who under the leadership of Sukāphā founded their kingdom in A.D. 1228. Sukāphā became the first Āhom king of Assam. From Sukāphā to Supimpnā there was practically no expansion of the Āhom kingdom. At first it was a small kingdom bounded by the Chutias on the east and Kacharis on the west and the south. The Bara Bhuyans ruled to the north-east of the Āhom kingdom. The expansion of the Āhom kingdom took place in the reign of Suhungmung alias Dihingīā Raja who ascended the throne at Charguya in A.D. 1497.

The basic principle on which Sukāphā founded the Āhom kingdom were friendship and alliance, rather than hostilities and force. But in regard to certain tribes, he made a departure from it. As Gait puts it: "Sukāphā was an enterprising and brave prince, and his treatment of the conquered Marans and Barahis was most judicious but his fair fame is sullied by the brutal means he adopted to over-awe the hostile Nagas of the Pathai."¹ According to Dekial Phukan, Sukāphā married as many as four daughters of Thami Thuma Maran family in order to bring the Marans under control.² Thus Sukāphā adopted a conciliatory attitude towards the native races and thereby he had been able to carve out a kingdom for himself

without much bloodshed. There is a difference between the invasion of Sukāphā and his predecessor Samlumphā, the brother of a king of Mungmanu who gained several notable victories in upper Assam. Samlumphā defeated the Chutias, as well as Arakan, Manipur and other countries.³ Sukāphā was a colonist rather than a military invader. His action is comparable to that of Babar, the founder of Mughal empire in India. Like Babar, Sukāphā had the audacity and ambition to carve out a kingdom for himself.⁴ Moreover, the condition of Assam was almost similar to that of India on the eve of Babar's invasion.⁵ There was no powerful kingdom in Assam. The eastern most region of Assam was ruled by different races—the Kacharis, the Chutias and the Bara Bhuyans. In the Western part, there flourished the Kamata kingdom.

The kingdom founded by Sukāphā saw a marked expansion in the reign of Suhungmung alias Dihingīā Raja (A.D. 1497-A.D. 1537) who had annexed the easternmost Chutia kingdom and drove out the Kacharis beyond the Dhansiri river. The Bara Bhuyans or the petty Bhuyan chiefs, who ruled the north-eastern tract of the Brahmaputra river were completely brought under control. In view of expansion and consolidation of the Āhom rule, Suhungmung may be called the real founder of the Āhom kingdom in Assam, while Sukāphā laid the foundation of the same. Suhungmung's reign of forty-two years was not only important from the point of view of Āhom expansionism but also responsible for the upliftment of the social and political conditions of the State. During his reign, people were divided into clans, and artisans were imported from the vanquished Chutia country and elsewhere. "The use of fire-arms was introduced and the Saka era of the Hindus was adopted in place of the old system of calculating dates by the Jovian cycle of sixty years."⁶

The seeds of the Āhom Government sown in the reign of Sukāphā had grown into a tree in the hands of Susengphā alias Pratap Singha (A.D. 1603-A.D. 1641). After Suhungmung's death, his son Suklenmung ascended the throne (A.D. 1539-A.D. 1552). Suklenmung in turn was succeeded by Sukhāmphā. During his reign, i.e., A.D. 1552 to A.D. 1603, the Koch General Chilarai occupied Gargaon, the Āhom Capital, and the Āhoms had to acknowledge the Koch

supremacy. In such a state of affairs, there could be no improvement in the administrative machinery of the State. During the reign of Susengphā alias Pratap Singha (A.D. 1603-A.D. 1641), there was an evident growth and expansion of the administrative system of the State. The entire socio-political structure was remodelled.

We noted in chapter II, that the Khel system was brought into existence and the entire population was divided into two categories—the Pāiks and the Chamuās. The political and social structure based on Got-pāik system which meant the rendering of physical labour in lieu of cash revenue to be paid to the Royal treasury, continued down to the last phase of Āhom supremacy. Pratap Singha was not only a powerful Āhom king but was also extremely popular. The Mohammedan expansionism towards the east could be successfully arrested by him. His able minister Momai Tamuli Barbarua introduced a number of reforms in the social and political spheres.⁷ Pratap Singha's reign is remarkable not only from the point of view of reform but it had really fostered the growth of the Āhom Government. The principal posts like Barphukan, Barbarua, Kajalimukiā gohāin, Jogiāl gohāin, Rahiāl Barua etc., were created during this period. The relations with the neighbouring tribes like the Daffalas, Miris, etc. were improved with the introduction of the Duar (passes) and Katati system. In order to maintain peace in the frontier areas, Garumariās were appointed. Thus the administrative and the military system acquired a new look. Many old offices created in the preceding period were abolished. For instance, there were two Panisiyas when the kingdom was extended upto Kaliabar. Now two more Panisiyas were appointed when the 'thana' was established at Gauhati. These Panisiyas exercised jurisdiction both on the southern and northern banks of the Brahmaputra. Till the time of Pratap Singha two Panisiyas, Langi and Rankap, were placed in charge of the southern tract of the Brahmaputra while Madankhowa and Pikchai were placed in charge of the northern tract. Each of them maintained six thousand soldiers.⁸ When Langi was first made the Barphukan, the office of Panisiya was abolished. Similarly, certain offices created during the reign of Suhungmung alias Dihingiā Raja, i.e.,

Habungīā Gohāin, Khamjangīā Gohāin, Bailungiā Gohāin, etc.⁹ no longer flourished in the latter phase of the Āhom Government.

Mirjumlāh's invasion of Assam in A.D. 1662 subjected the State to a temporary period of foreign domination. But it really taught the government to strengthen the administrative and military position of the State. Chakradhvaj Singha, the successor of Jayadhvaj Singha (A.D. 1648-A.D. 1663), who suffered humiliation at the hands of Mughals, was able to construct large warships, war implements etc. and drove out the Mughals from Kām̄rūp. His able General Lachit Barphukan was responsible for regaining the lost prestige of the country. The country had to pass through a period of ministerial supremacy, since the death of Chakradhvaj Singha. There had been no less than seven kings during this period and not one of them died a natural death. The internal corruption and dissension were at the root of all these developments. However, since A.D. 1681 when Gadadhar Singha ascended the throne, the central administrative machinery was made stronger. Gadadhar Singha had broken the powers of the nobles and took steps to wipe out all corruption. His successor Rudra Singha was the greatest of all Āhom Kings. Rudra Singha had been able to fly the flag of victory over Kachari and Jayantia kingdoms. He entered into alliances with the kings of Tripura, Manipur and Kooch Behar and dreamt of conquering Bengal. An historian Gohāin calls him the Āhom Akbar because of his great ambition and conciliatory attitude towards all people.¹⁰ It stands to reason that the rise of the Dacca city dates from the beginning of 17th century, when Islam Khan, the Mughal Viceroy transferred the seat of government from Rangmahal to Dacca. This change was dictated by military considerations as the eastern frontier of the Mughal empire was exposed to the ravages of many warlike invaders, i.e., the Āhoms, the Maghs and the Arakanese.¹¹

The successors of Rudra Singha upto Rajeswar Singha (A.D. 1751-A.D. 1769) were all capable princes. During their reigns, material progress of the country reached the apex. They were all initiated to either sect of Hinduism, and they constructed large number of temples. Lakshmi Singha, the

successor of Rajeswar Singha was a weak king and he was a puppet in the hands of his powerful Barbarua Kirtichandra. The oppression and high handedness of Kirtichandra gave rise to the Moāmariā rebellion. The Moāmariā Mahanta or the chief of Moāmariā Vaiṣṇava Sect was also humiliated by the Barbarua in all manner of insulting epithets. This, and other reasons infuriated the Moāmariā Marans who raised the standard of revolt. The insurgents were able to seize Royal power for quite a period of time. This rebellion completely shattered the nerves of the Āhom Government. Lakshmi Singha's successor "Gaurinath Singha was the most incompetent, blood thirsty, disreputable and cowardly of all Āhom kings." His vindictive treatment of the Moāmariās once again gave stimulus to the rebellious people. Internal dissensions and corruptions also weakened the Āhom Government and this finally caused the downfall of the mighty Āhom kingdom in the reign of Chandra Kanta Singha (A.D. 1810-A.D. 1818). The Burmese rule which lasted from A.D. 1819 to A.D. 1824 completely brokedown the Āhom supremacy in the eastern region of India.

The kingdom, established by the Tāi-Āhom rulers was in their own words 'a casket of gold.'¹² This remark of the nobles cannot be called untrue in view of enormous gold and silver which Mirjumlah in A.D. 1662 and Captain Welsh in A.D. 1794 took away from Assam. Mirjumlah even did not spare the buried treasures in the Maidāms or vaults of the Āhom kings.¹³ The government and administrative system which the Āhoms introduced in Assam was a novel one, although they did not hesitate to inherit the good elements of the previous regimes. In the land grant copper plate of Maharaja Harjarvarma of Śālastambha dynasty (A.D. 829-A.D. 830, i.e., 510 Gupta), mention has been made of offices like—Mahasainyapati, Mahadwaradhipatya, Mahapratihara, Mahamatya, Brahmanadhikar etc.¹⁴ In the Āhom system of government, officers of this category were not there. According to Wade and Welsh, the system of government cannot be called a perfect Monarchy. It was undoubtedly a Monarchical government, but it exhibited certain features of aristocracy as well. Robinson held that it was a peculiar species of Monarchy, as the power of the sovereign differed from most

Monarchical government. Ministers in this system of government had a say in the selection of a king. The Patra-mantri exercised some amount of power in transacting or executing the state business. The office of the Phukan was a unique creation of the Āhoms. Nowhere in the rest of India, an office of this nature could be found. It must be stated that the entire fabric of the administrative set-up did not grow in a particular period. The offices were created in keeping with the needs of the situation. With the expansion of territory, administrative problems arose and, therefore, many new offices had to be created. The office of the Barphukan, Sadiyakhowāgohāin, Marangikhowāgohāin etc., were examples of this nature. The Āhoms appeared to have unwillingly incorporated into their system elements of other governments. According to some writers, the office of Rajkhowā was a creation of the Bara Bhuyans who ruled the north-east tract beyond the Brahmaputra river. In other spheres also, the Āhoms gladly accepted the good elements from others. The Ārowān, Kekoradolā etc., were adopted from the vanquished Chutias. Similarly, Basowāl, Tangāli etc., were taken from the Bara Bhuyans.¹⁵ Even after annexation of Kām̄rūp, the Mughal revenue system was not abolished. The offices of Chowdhury, Patowari etc. were incorporated into the Āhom Khel and Pāik systems. The Mughal Paraganas were simply reorganised with suitable additions and alterations.

It seems that offices of Hazarika, Saikia, Bora and Barua belonging to both civil and military spheres were the creations of a later period maintaining a resemblance with their Mughal counterparts. In Akbar's time there were military Commanders of Yak Hazari Omrah, Dwo Hazari Omrah etc. under Munsabdari system.¹⁶ Similarly, Biswa Singha, the founder of Koch Kingdom maintained officers like Mazumdar, Hazari, Saikia, Thakuria etc.¹⁷ Thus, the Āhom administrative system presented a combination of Āhom and non-Āhom elements. The Āhom Government like that of the Mughals was military in its origin and retained the military character to the last. As mentioned in Chapter-VII, Military Phukans and Rajkhowās were also the judges of the court.

As regards the organization of administrative areas, the Āhoms seem to have had no definite principles like that of the

Sultans or the Mughals. It has been already shown that the division of kingdom into Uttarkul and Dakhinkul was not really political one, as was the case during the period of the ancient rulers of Kāmarūpa, of both the Śālastambha and Pal dynasty. The ancient territorial division did not, however, influence in any way the Āhom administration, as no district like Bisaya or janapada existed in the Āhom period. On the other hand, territorial Khels of the Āhom period were organized on the basis of an older territorial division—Tāngāni. It is not clear from the existing record whether Tāngāni was a political division or not.

In the sphere of religion, it seems that the king was not the head of the system. He was only a temporal head. In the initial phase of its rule, the Āhom ruler did not embrace Hinduism, yet none of them cherished any hatred towards it. On the other hand, the early Muslim rulers of India acted in an entirely opposite direction. The Sultans of Delhi tried to impose Islamic faith by hook or by crook.¹⁸ The Āhoms had their tribal religion which they did not abandon even after their initiation as Hindus under a guru. Susenphā (A.D. 1439-A.D. 1488) was not initiated to Hinduism but he had constructed the famous Nagsankar temple at Uttarkul in 1402 Saka. It is true, that at the instigation of some interested persons Pratap Singha (A.D. 1603-A.D. 1641) persecuted the vaiṣṇavite guru Mukunda Bapu and others. Gadadhar Singha in A.D. 1692 plundered the treasure house of Vaiṣṇavite Gossain of Dakhinpat. But Pratap Singha and Gadadhar Singha were not opposed to Hinduism as such. There was no Royal proclamation for the general denouncement of Hinduism. The reasons for Gadadhar's persecution of Vaiṣṇava sect can be attributed to the fact that many Bhakats or devotees had claimed exemption from the physical labour which caused unusual difficulties. It may be noted in this connection that with the rise of Vaiṣṇavism, the number of Bhakats grew larger and larger and the Got-pāik system tended to breakdown. There was no persecution of religious sect on purely religious grounds. The successors of Gadadhar Singha benevolently made grants in lands and endowments to temples. Most of them were enrolled as disciples of either Śākta or Vaiṣṇava gurus. As stated in Chapter-III, the government

adopted a policy of religious toleration. In regard to Islamic faith it did not object to its propagation. Mohammedans were also appointed to certain offices of importance like Hāzarikā, Saikiā or Borā. There were instances of donating pirpal lands to the pious Muslims.

The social structure for which Momai Tamuli Barbarua was primarily responsible was of a unique character. Nowhere in other parts of India, such a social composition flourished. As noted in Chapter-II above, four adult males constituted a 'got' which was an indispensable part of a guild or Khel. Each member of the got was called a Pāik. As each Pāik was required to go to the battle field under the existing system, he was also called Kāri-Pāik. It is not known whether the Assamese Pāik had any relation with the Payaks¹⁹ or foot soldiers under the administrative system of the Delhi Sultanate.

The Chamuās, on the other hand, constitute a different category of people who were not required to render to physical services to the state. The Chamuās like Sabhāpandit or Doloi enjoyed a respectable position both in the Royal court and outside. It is noteworthy that both the Chamuās and Pāiks had to perform their respective duties under the superintendence of a Phukan or a Barua as the case might be. The division of people into Blacksmith or potter in keeping with their own interest and ability may be compared to modern division of labour. However, there are differences. A humble subject of the Āhom kingdom was expected to be expert not only in his allotted trade like arrow-making, boat-building etc. but he had also to keep himself ready to fight at the battle field whenever the need arose. The entire framework of administration was thus based on this social composition. It is, therefore, difficult to demarcate between the social and political activities of men of those days. It should also be noted that the Pāik had a privilege of nominating their superiors in that, they could make a request to the Monarch for their removal.

The local or provincial administration, excepting the province of the Barphukan seemed to have received less attention of the Central Government. The local governors like Chāring Raja and Tipām Raja were created as a measure

to check the rebellious attitude of the princes having higher political ambition. Most of them spent their lives in the metropolis attending the Royal Court. The Border Lords like Sadiyākhawāghāin or Marangikhowāghāin enjoyed much reputation, but their primary duty appeared to have been military in character. From the point of view of defence, the importance of these offices can hardly be exaggerated. The ferocious hill tribes of the north and south so frequently made inroads into the territory of Assam, that appointment of different categories of frontier officers was made an imperative necessity.

After the annexation of Kām̄rūp, the office of the Barphukan was upgraded. The Barphukan was the governor of the whole of the Kām̄rūp province. He combined in himself executive, judicial and military powers. His office was really very important from the point of view of defence and civil administration.

There was no separate judicial machinery to deal with the administration of Justice. This aspect of Āhom administration was not as sound as the executive side had been. Complaints were received verbally and the cause was decided according to reports of the umpire, yet there was scope for appeal. The system no doubt violated the theory of separation of powers. In fact, the doctrine of separation of powers had no place not only in the Āhom Government, but in most of the monarchies of by-gone days. Even the modern democracies do not adhere to the doctrine rigidly.

The punishment inflicted by the courts of different judges of the Āhom Government were no doubt severe when it is compared with that of a present court. But from the study of contemporary criminal law of neighbouring states, those cannot be overestimated. In England, the classical land of democracy, there was no fair trial in the preceding era. It is true, that an accused person in England under the existing system cannot be examined or cross-examined as our witnesses. These are the great advantages to a prisoner.²⁰ But the criminal law in England like that of the Āhoms had not been as fair and generous in the preceding centuries as it is now. In the words of Sir Thomas Erskine May, "The deepest stain upon the policy of irresponsible government is to

be found in the history of criminal law. The lives of men were sacrificed with a reckless barbarity, worthier of an Eastern despot or an African chief than a Christian State."²¹ It was only in 1836 after a contention of several decades that privilege was secured to prisoners.

Legislation in the true sense of the word, was not present in the Āhom system of government. But the customs and conventions which the people observed received recognition of the State. Hindus retained their law of marriage, of adoption, of joint family, of partition and succession, which came down from time immemorial. On the other hand, Mohammedans who settled in Assam permanently retained their law of marriage, testamentary and intestate succession sanctioned by the Islamic faith. The Āhom Government did not impose any limitations on these customary laws.

One of the unique features of the Āhom system of government was its revenue system. The cash revenue system was practically absent in the Āhom Kingdom. Instead of cash revenue, people had to render physical services. Only a nominal land revenue was paid by the cultivator for cultivating lands in excess of their allotted portions. The revenue system under-went changes towards the close of Āhom rule. A large number of land grants were made to the temples, Brahmins and pious persons. The British Government after the annexation of Assam, introduced the cash revenue system. This, therefore, created a dissension in the mind of the Assamese people. There was, however, the system of payment of revenue other than land revenue. In Kāmrup, Āhom Government had upheld the Mughal revenue system and this was combined with the Pāik system.

The Āhom Government made it a point to establish alliance and friendship with the powerful neighbours. Pratap Singha despite the existence of enmity with the Kacharis, sought their friendship in view of the rising Mohammedan expansionism. Similarly, Rudra Singha made alliance with the kings of Tripura, Morung, Cooch Behar etc., with the object of elevating his kingdom to the rank of first-rate power in India. The friendly relations established with the king of Manipur in the reign of Suhungmung continued down to the reign of Gaurinath Singha. Thus the foreign policy of the

Āhom Government can be called a projection of home policy as it was the principal object of the Āhom king to defend and maintain peace in the State. The policy which the Āhom Government adopted in relation to frontier tribal peoples was indeed model for the future.

In the sphere of public works, the government made lasting contributions. It took immense interest in the construction of cities, buildings, roads, stone bridges and gigantic tanks. The successors to the Āhom Government practically did nothing more in this field. The tanks which are called Sagar or ocean on account of their colossal size, provided a perennial source of water for the people of respective localities. The striking feature of these tanks was that the level of water remained the same all throughout the year. The stone bridges constructed during the period under review were of a novel kind.²²

The stone bridge over Namdang river, was "constructed by king Rudra Singha within a night with one massive stone in the year A.D. 1703."²³

The Āhoms ruled Assam from A.D. 1228 to A.D. 1826 for about six hundred years. During this long period, a new system of administration, culture, language and nationality sprang up. The people of Tāi origin (Āhoms) gradually had given up their ancestral religion and language and had embraced the language and religion of the soil. They accepted the local customs and established cultural relations with the western centres of learning. From the time of Suhungmung, envoys and messengers were sent to Orissa, (Puri) Santipur and other famous places of India with the object of obtaining new information and culture. It has to be acknowledged that Āhom rule was largely responsible for the growth of Assamese language and culture. There are certain intrinsic values of their system of government and administration.

A study of the social, political and administrative system of the Āhoms will enable one to bridge over the missing links between the past and the present systems. The powerful Mughals ruled India for a little more than two hundred years. The Mughals left their legacy in the system of administration. The Mughal system was copied by the vassal kings of Jaypur and Bundelkhand. Even Shivaji, the staunch champion of Hindu orthodoxy copied it first in Maharashtra.²⁴ But the

Āhoms who ruled Assam remained largely uninfluenced by the Mughal system. It is true that the Āhoms did not abolish the Mughal administrative system existing in Kām̄rūp. Yet the basic frame work continued to be based on the Khel and Pāik system.

Importance of the study of Āhom system of Government

Āhom rule in Assam came to an end on 24 February in A.D. 1826, and the State passed into alien British hands. There are certain causes for the downfall of the Āhom Kingdom. They are for instance, internal dissension, growth of rival and hostile cliques in the court, lack of vigour, greed for independence by the chieftains coupled with Burmese invasion. The system of government as such cannot be held responsible for the downfall of the Āhom Raj. English writers are also of the opinion that the Āhoms possessed a highly organized system of government peculiar to the Shan tribes, differing in many respect from that which prevailed throughout India. The Āhom administrative system was a centralised one. at the same time, it took into consideration certain principles which could be regarded as democratic. This gave prolonged life and energy to it. The Khel and Pāik system was very popular among the people of Assam. Though the Khels functioned under one responsible officer, the common subjects had a say in the nomination of their head. We have already shown that the Monarchs often honoured the wishes of the Pāiks in matters of appointment of a Phukan, Barua or Hāzarikā. As each Pāik was bound to offer his services to the State he developed a sense of responsibility and unity. The Khel system was a means by which each and every adult male member (excepting the slaves) could take a share in the larger interests of the State. Historians, on the other hand, believe that the weakness of Mughal Government was associated with the composition of Mughal army which consisted primarily of the contingents maintained by the revenue assignments given to the great nobles. This was also prevalent during the reign of Ala-ud-Din Khilji, who perceived the defects of this system but had not succeeded in abolishing it. Akbar too, realised the unsoundness of the system but could not reform it.²⁵ The merit of the Āhom Khel system rested on the unity of its

members, who often considered themselves as brethren. The people belonging to different castes had to work in one Khel and thereby a sense of fraternity developed among them. It was the sacred duty of each individual to go to the battle fields and fulfilling duties of public works. Even Brahmins were not exempted from going to the battle and offering labours for the State. The traces of this Khel system are still found in Assamese village societies. This system, on the other hand, taught discipline and regard for law, which is an essential element of good governance. A student of political science can in fact, derive many ideas from the social composition of Assamese society of the Āhom period. It is true that owing to the changing mode of life, this system is not at all applicable at present with the old germ. But it stands to reason, that Gandhiji's idea of 'village Republic' does not seem to be fundamentally different from the medieval Assamese societies minus Kingship. Gandhiji was an advocate of economic decentralisation. He believed: "Swaraj of people means the sum-total of Swaraj (self-rule) of individuals. And such Swaraj comes only from performance by individuals of their duty as citizens—our village are on the verge of destruction owing to the disappearance of village industries. Among the industries the spinning wheel occupies the centre."²⁶ Thus, Gandhiji had a firm conviction that each Indian village can be converted to a perfect republic. In his own word: "My idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbour for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others, in which dependence is a necessity. Thus every villager's first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth."²⁷ Gandhiji's call for the revival of village industries like Blacksmithery, pottery, spinning wheel, does not mean 'putting back the hands of the clock of progress'. It really means saving village money and inculcation of the spirit of self sufficing and self dependence.²⁸

The medieval Assamese society was indeed a combination of several territorial and vocational Khels—such as Kamar, (blacksmithery), Kumar (pottery), Sonari (goldsmithery), Silakuti (stone cutter), etc. In each village, people of all the Khels were settled, in such a way that the villages gave some

evidence of a functioning democracy. In the medieval period not a single man could while away his time idly, unless he was very old or be ailing. Each man was required to be a member of a Khel. Weaving and spinning was the business of all sections of people irrespective of their being Chamua or Pāik. The suggestion for the creation of such villages really came from a humble attendant of Momai Tamuli Barbarua, who while giving vent to his opinion about the settlement of Basa and Dayang district said: "My lord has done really good work, but for want of a small needle one has to go to a far off land."²⁹ This remark made the Barbarua to think of self-sufficient villages, where people of all trades must inhabit side by side with mutual sympathy and cooperation. The villages thus constituted an indispensable part of the economy of the State. It may not be possible to revive the Āhom Khel system as it is not compatible with the needs of modern age. In a modified form, the village economy can be very easily developed constituting Khel taking people of similar trade which could function under the superintendence of a responsible officer. The compulsory physical service to the State made the people active. Indians after a period of long subjugation to British rule only learnt to have a rather dependent, slavish mentality coupled with indolence. The revival of village economy and organisation of the Khel system in a modified form might inculcate in the people a spirit of worthwhile service aimed at raising their standard of living. The Āhom Government organised the people in such a way that each of them was made to realise the value of labour. One of the causes of Gadadhar Singha's persecution of Vaiṣṇva Bhakats was that they wanted to evade physical labour.

The Āhom Patra-mantri system which is often compared to a modern democratic cabinet was a distinguishing feature of the government. The contemporary government of Kooch Behar or Kachari Kingdom was basically different from it. One of the merits of the system was that neither the Monarch nor the ministers could exercise supreme and absolute powers. Each organ appeared to be circumscribed by the other. It is true that the king possessed supreme powers of appointment and removal of the ministers. On the other hand, three

Dāngariās by putting their heads together could depose a tyrannical king. This principle acted as a safeguard against arbitrary actions of the rulers. There is scope for tyrannical action even in the popularly chosen democratic governments. The Indian people did experience such a thing in recent times.

The British Government in the early parts of its rule in Assam followed some principle laid down by the Āhom rulers. For instance, ferocious hill tribes of the frontiers of Assam could not be brought under control even with the application of force. The Āhom policy of giving concessions in the form of blackmail³⁰ had brought lasting results. The British Government permitted the Bhutias, Daffalas and Akas to levy *posa* from each house along the foot of their hills. The Hazarikhowā Akas were permitted to levy from each house "one portion of a female dress, one bundle of cotton thread and one cotton handkerchief." When the collection of *posa* was found unbearable for some reason, every effort was made to induce them to commute their claims for a fixed money payment. This was eventually done. Accordingly, Bhutias of Charduar received a sum of Rs. 1,740. Thabengia Bhutias Rs. 146, Akas Rs. 700, Daffalas Rs. 4,130 and Miris Rs. 1,118 per year.³¹ It is, therefore, evident that many features of Āhom Government exercised influence on the modern government. The Duars of Āhom period did not give rise to any border disputes. The Duars and the Hats or markets along the northern and southern frontiers of Āhom Kingdom offered scope for free intercourse between the people of the hills and the people of the plains. It must be noted that for this reason only the Nagas of different localities along the southern border used the Assamese language as a common language in their transactions.³² Such a policy of friendly cooperation could possibly solve many of our present problems.

Though a Monarchy, the Āhom Government appeared to enjoy mass popularity. David Scott, the first Agent to the Governor General in the north-east frontier of Bengal, was of this opinion: "It would be too much to affirm, but if means were taken to raise the character and qualifications of the nobility, by an improved system of education, it can scarcely

be doubted that with all its imperfections, this system would prove greatly superior to the single despotism of Kooch Behar and other subordinate States, where the chief too often delegates his authority to servants who have anything but interest of his subjects at heart and who are suffered without check or control to carry oppression and misgovernment to an extent that under other circumstances would not be compatible either with the safety of their Sovereignty or continuance of their own power."³³ This remark of David Scott holds good even today if we take into consideration the despotic army rule of some neighbouring countries. The popularity of Āhom Government was also evidenced by the fact that Maniram Dewan, a non-Āhom (Kayastha-Hindu) urged the East India Company to get the country restored to Raja Purandar Singha.³⁴

The importance of the study of Āhom system of government cannot be denied in view of the fact that it had fostered the growth of Assamese culture and nationality. The population of Assam is a combination of races of different stocks. From the reign of Mahabhuti Varman, a Kāmarūpa king of A.D. 6th century, we get epigraphical record of Nagara Brahmins and Kayasthas living in Assam. Probably Brahmins had been living in Assam even in A.D. 4th century,³⁵ when Pushyavarman (approx. A.D. 380-A.D. 400) was the ruler of it. Like Brahmins and Kayasthas, the Kalitas who owe their origin to Kshatriyas are inhabitants of Assam from times immortal. On the other hand, Koch, Kacharis and Chutias are aborigines or the earliest known inhabitants of Assam.³⁶ In addition to these, the people of other races "Heluya Keots who cultivate the ground and Jalowa keyots who fish," Nadiyāls, Hirā, Mālākār, Nati, Hāris, Chandāl,³⁷ Jogi, Kātani, Suri, and tribal people like Miri, Mikir and Deuri constitute the population of Assam. The people who came to the valley, either from Bengal or other western provinces settled here permanently, intermarried with the local people and merged themselves with the mainstream of Assamese life and culture in the manner of the Āhoms. Under the able guidance of Āhom rulers, all these people were welded into one Assamese nationality. The Mohammedans of Assam also differ from these of other parts of Hindusthan. They "act

exactly in the manner of the Assamese and have nothing of Islam except the name."³⁸ They performed like a section of the Hindus, Bisahari, Barmani and Subhachandi worship.³⁹ Under the Āhom rule, all these people learnt to build up a common heritage of life and culture of the people of Assam.

The contributions of Āhom Government in the sphere of literature, art and architecture cannot be ignored. The paintings and architecture of the Āhom period received recognition from experts outside Assam.

In the sphere of village administration too, we find the traces of system existed for the settlement of disputes. Panchasabhasada of Chandra Kanta Singha's time, probably means a local body for serving the village. The British Government in the early part of its rule retained many aspects of the Āhom system in the administration of villages. The Āhoms "seemed to have favoured the panchayat as an instrument of local government. This body, constituted by elderly experienced representatives of the people in the rural areas concerned, was generally utilised for settling local disputes. But these local bodies were generally overshadowed by personal rule of feudal nobles who constituted the hierarchy of the Āhom administration as well as by a system of centralised monarchy."⁴⁰ In the early part of the British rule "the ordinary criminal and civil duties were performed by councils of the local gentry designated panchayats, of which there were some half a dozen. More heinous cases were tried with the assistance of a panchayat, by the Commissioner's Assistants who also disposed of appeals from the panchayats and from whose decisions, both appellate and original, a further appeal lay to the commissioner himself."⁴¹ Thus almost the same machinery of the Āhom Government in a slightly modified form was introduced by the British. Even today, the village bodies of the above type have not completely disappeared. The village people for petty problems do not go to the court of law but prefer to invite a Mel. It appears to be a beneficent legacy of Āhom rule and its administration.

From the time of Bhaskarvarman of A.D. seventh century, many changes have taken place in the system of government and administration of Assam. A study of the process of change and development is not only interesting but also

helpful in trying to give a proper shape to the political institutions suited to the needs of the time.

NOTES

1. Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 80.
2. Dhekial Phukan, *Assam Buranji* (Bengalee), 2nd edition, p. 29.
3. Gait, op. cit., p. 77.
4. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern frontier of British India*, p. 114.
5. Mahajan, *The Muslim rule in India Part II*, p. 8
5. Ibid., p. 2.
6. Gait, op. cit., p. 99.
7. For details of Mimai Tamuli Barbarua and Swargadev Pratap Singha, the following books may be referred:
Barua Indibar, *Jibanadarsha* (1889);
Sarma Benudhar, *Durbin* (1951).
8. Dewan, *Buranji Veveka Ratna*, D.H.A.S. Transcript, p. 84; also see Bhuyan (edit.), *Asom Buranji* (Sukumar), p. 45.
9. G. Barua, *Āhom Buranji*, pp. 59, 60, 73 and 75.
10. U. Gohain. *Assam under the Āhoms*, p. 45.
11. Hunter, *Imperial gazetteer*, 1885, Vol. I.
12. Bhuyan, (edit.), *Asom Buranji* (Sukumar), p. 110.
13. Mirjumlah in addition to three lakhs of rupees worth gold and silver which he found at Gargaon, together with looted golds, agreed to leave Assam on payment of 'twenty, thousand tolas of gold and 6 time this quantity of silver' (Gait, op. cit., pp. 134-142). According to Srinath Duara Barbarua, the writer of *Tungkhungia Buranji*, Captain Welsh took away from Assam—gold ornaments totalling 400,000 pieces, silver ornaments 400,000 pieces, gold coins 200,00000 nos. together with a large number of Brass, Copper and Kunch articles, *T.B.* p. 129.
14. Bhattacharyya, *Kāmṛūp Śāsanavali* p. 51.
15. Tamuli Phukan, op. cit., (1964 edition) p. 18. For the meaning of *Arowan*, *Basowāl*, *Tangāli* and *Kekoradolā* see glossary of vernacular terms.
16. Mahajan, op. cit., p. 87.
17. Sarma Nabin (edit.), *Darrang Raj Bangsavali*, pp. 38-40.
18. Mahajan, op. cit., pp. 82-119.
19. Mahajan, op. cit., p. 211.
20. Ghosh, *England's work in India*, p. 24.
21. Erskine, *Constitutional History of England*, Vol. III, p. 393. quoted in, Ghosh, *England's work in India*, p. 24.
22. The stone bridge or *Sil-Sakos* were constructed over the rivers of

Assam even in the reigns of Kāmarūpa kings. "There is still a small stone bridge in the western part of north Gauhati which is called *Sil-Sako*. The other *Sil-Sako* was over a channel of the Barnadi, and it was this bridge over which Mohamṁad-I-Bukhtiyar and his Turkish cavalry passed in the year A.D. 1206." The bridge was destroyed by a great earth-quake of A.D. 1897. There is a difference between the stone bridges of the Āhom period and ancient Kāmarūpa. "The design and the style of architecture of this bridge (destroyed in 1897) evidently belongs to a remote period in the annals of Kāmarūpa"—K.L. Barua, *Early History of Kāmarūpa*, p. 118.

23. Handique, *A guide to Sibsagar*, p. 14.
24. Mahajan, op. cit., p. 244.
25. W. Haig, *Cambridge History of India* Vol. VI, pp. 374-375.
26. Gandhī, *Socialism of my conception* (Bhavan's book), p. 143.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
28. Masruwalla, *Gandhi and Marx* (Bengalee edition), pp. 70-71.
29. Benudhar Sarma, *Durbin*, p. 6.
30. The word 'blackmail' here means a privilege of collecting—taxes or using slaves from the frontier areas, which the Āhom Government granted to the hill tribes for their satisfaction. But the dictionary meaning of the words is a tribute paid to robbers.
31. Gait, op. cit., p. 365.
32. After the independence of India, Nagas have been able to constitute a province for them. But all transactions of Nagaland are made through the medium of Nagamese, which is a different name for the broken Assamese.
33. Welsh, op. cit., p. 384.
34. Mills, *Report on the province of Assam 1854*, Appendix, K B., IXXVIII.
35. K.L. Barua, op. cit., p. 61.
Bhattacharyya, op. cit., p. 17.
36. Gait, op. cit., pp. 46-299.
37. Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, pp. 54-55.
38. "Account of Sahabuddin Talis", quoted in Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 153.
39. Dhekial Phukan, *Assam Buranji* (Bengalee), 2nd edition (*Bishari, Barmani* etc. are the Tantric worships), pp. 90-103.
40. *District Gazetteer Sibsagar 1967*, p. 328.
41. Gait, op. cit., p. 345: Those panchayats were known as *Barpanchayats and Sarupanchayats*.

WORTHWHILE BOOKS

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