

Technological Changes
And
Mode Of Production
In
The Evolution Of The Ahom State

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Chapter I

Introduction

The major and dominant trends of historical analysis during the present times is broadly confined within the ambit of Positivist ideas and hence much of our understanding of the historical process is confined to broad political narratives that detail the sequence of important socio-political events in a geographical area within a specified time frame. Another method of understanding history is to view it as man's progress through distinct stages of production. These stages in turn are determined by factors such as technology, production relations, social formations *et al.* This approach of historical analysis enables the historian to enquire into some basic formative factors regarding a society, in the light of which, can also be explained the process of historical evolution.

However, much of our existing knowledge about the Ahom state is confined within the broad parameters of socio-political narratives. The sequence of events, such as the entry of the Ahoms under the leadership of Sukapha into Upper Assam in 1228, the land route followed through Yunan and Upper Burma, the policy of conquest and consolidation, their wars with the Mughals, and their relations with the people of the neighbouring regions are amply recorded. But, most of these do not enquire into the basic formative factors that contributed to the emergence of the mature Ahom

state, with such idiosyncratic traits as the *paik* and *khel* system etc. Neither has precise enquires been made regarding the stages through which the Ahom state progressed and the factors that determined the various stages.

The mature Ahom state exuded dignity and military prowess that was scarcely rivalled by other ruling powers of the region . Obviously, Ahom strength was based on economic solvency that would require adequate surplus production. But the early Ahom state had a simple economy with little surplus production, but gradually greater economic solvency was achieved, as reflected in the public works such as excavation of large tanks, construction of roads and bridges, forts, ramparts, and such buildings as the Rang Ghar, the Kareng Ghar, the Tolatoli Ghar etc. How was this surplus generated and how was it appropriated in the Ahom state? What effects did they have on the social formation? In the light of the these, would it be possible to classify the Ahom state under any particular stage of development such as the feudal mode or whether the Asiatic Mode of Production, rejected for the rest of India would be applicable in the case of Assam? What was the level of technology in the Ahom state and how did changes in technology determine the flow of historical change, are questions that awaited adequate explanation.

By undertaking an overview of the studies that have been conducted on these lines to explain the process of historical change it is seen that a tremendous amount of work was produced by Marx and Engels, which detailed the various facets of the concept of mode of production. Mention

may be made of Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, (Moscow 1976), Marx (with introduction by E.J.Hobsbawn), *Pre Capitalist Economic Formations*, (New York, reprint 1975), *Capital* (3 volumes), (Moscow, 1986), Engels, *Anti Duhring*, (Moscow 1975), *Dialectics of Nature*, (Moscow, 1986). *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and State*, (Moscow, 1985). Mention may also be made to some of the excellent commentaries done on these works , especially by some of the Russian writers, such as Kh. Momjan, *Landmarks in History*, (Moscow 1978) Yuri Popov, *Essays in Political Economy Imperialism and the Developing Countries*, (Moscow, 1984). Anatoly Rakitov, *The Principles of Philosophy*, (Moscow 1989), Lidiya Novikova, *Civilisation and the Historical Process*, (Moscow 1983).

Specific works which seek to link technology, modes of production and production relations with historical evolution are confined mainly to the European context. Reference may be made to Lynn White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change*, (Oxford 1978), Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London 1974), and Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, (London 1962).

An excellent work that draws linkages between technological inputs and historical evolution all through history in broad survey is V.Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*, (London 1942, Reprint 1978). At a general level, reference may also be made to the series of four volumes by J.D.Bernal , *Science in History* (Cambridge 1969), Joseph Needham,

Science and Civilization in China (6 volumes, London 1952), R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, (4 volumes, Leiden, 1956), Charles Singer et al. (ed.), *History of Technology*, (5 volumes, Oxford, 1975).

With regards to India, yeomen service have been rendered by writers such as R.S.Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India*, (Madras, 1983, Reprint 1990), D.D.Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, (Bombay 1956), Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, (New Delhi, 1978), *From Lineage to State*, (Delhi, reprint 1996), Harbans Mukhia , *Perspectives on Medieval History*, (New Delhi 1993), Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* (Bombay, 1963), to mention a few of the trend setting writers and their major books along with their numerous publications and addresses at various forums did establish the basis of linking mode of production and technology with the historical process.

Though the works of these writers are extremely penetrating and illuminating with regards to the general trends of Indian history, yet they have not substantially incorporated much regional variations in their works and hence the generalizations made about the all India situation may not hold equally true with regards to the north east. It has to be appreciated that, in this region, altogether different geographical, racial and cultural factors influenced technological innovations, mode of production and production relations, which in turn influenced historical evolution.

Interestingly, some other works on technology, such as O.P.Jaggi, *History of Science, Technology and Medicine in India*, Vol I, "Technology in Ancient India"(Delhi 1981) and D.P.Chattopadhyay (ed.) *Studies in the History of Science in India* (2 vols.,) (New Delhi 1982), G.Kuppuram and K.Kumudamoni (ed.) *History of Technology in India* (12 vols.), (New Delhi, 1990) and Deepak Kumar (ed.) *Science and Empire*, (New Delhi 1991), does provide information about technology in ancient India, but has hardly noticed this region, nor provided comprehensive linkages between technology, social formation and historical change.

At the same time, though a lot of work has been done on Assam, such as E.A.Gait, *A History of Assam* (Guwahati, 1926 2nd edition), Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam* (Guwahati 1963, J.P.Wade, *An Account of Assam* (Guwahati 1972, 2nd edition), John M'cosh, *Topography of Assam*, (Delhi, reprint 1975) A.J.Moffatt Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, (Guwahati reprint 1984) , Alexzander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India* (Indian reprint, Delhi 1989) and specific works on the Ahoms, such as the works of U.N.Gohain, *Assam Under the Ahoms*, (Jorhat 1942, Reprint Guwahati 1999), Padmeshwar Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*, (Guwahati 1968), Hiteshwar Barbor, *Ahomor Din*, (2nd Edition, Guwahati 1997), S.Rajkumar, *Itihase Suwora Sokha Ta Bosor*, (Jorhat, 1980), Lila Gogoi, (ed.) *The History of the System of Ahom Administration*, (Calcutta, 1991), *Tai Sanskritir Ruprekha* (Dibrugarh , 1994) *Herua Dinor Katha*, (Sibsagar, 1959), S.K.Bhuyan , *Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singha*, (Guwahati,

1975). *Mir Jumlar Asam Akromon*, (Guwahati, 1994) *Studies in the History of Assam*, (New Delhi, 1985), *Anglo Assamese Relations (1771-1826)*, (Guwahati, 1974), *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, (Guwahati, 1992) *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, , (Guwahati, 1994) N.K.Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age*, (Calcutta 1970), H.K.Barpujari (ed.) volumes of the *Comprehensive History of Assam* and others. But, these have not studied modes of production and technological change as concomitants of change in the evolution of the Ahom state. Probably, the only specific attempt to subject the Ahom situation to the Asiatic Mode of Production analysis was by Sajal Nag (NEHU "Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities" Vol.1, No.1, Jan-Jun 1998). Unfortunately, the result proved to be disappointing as the erroneous representation of facts made the findings infructuous.

A welcome change has been the works of Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, (Calcutta 1991). Guha has made use of the tools of historical materialism and has examined Ahom technology, wet rice cultivation, superior iron tools and excellent social organization contributing to the process of the evolution of the Ahom state. However, his attempt at explaining the transition from tribalism to feudalism, or the conditions of semi feudalism, has not been done on the basis of drawing substantive linkages between technology, mode of production and production relations, hence we are left without an comprehensive explanation regarding historical change or an adequate categorization of the Ahom state.

Dhrubajyoti Borah, *Moamoria Gana Abbyuthan* (Guwahati, 1983) *Itihās Chinta*, (Guwahati 1988), has looked at certain aspects of Ahom rule, such as the *paik* system with remarkable insight, yet the study is limited in its scope and content.

Romesh Buragohain "Ahom State Formation : An Enquiry into the Factors of Polity Formation in Medieval North East India" (Unpublished Ph D thesis NEHU, 1988), has also done a good study on Ahom state formation, and refers to improved agricultural practice, such as wet rice cultivation facilitating surplus production, which in turn helped the process of state formation. But the technological base of the mode of production, the production relations and the determinants of the stages of the evolution of the Ahom state does not receive adequate attention.

The volumes of the NEIHA, also contain a number of papers dealing with various aspects of the Ahom state, such as Arun Barua, " Tai Ahom Monarchy" (2nd Session 1981), Debasish Sen, "Early History of the Tai Ahoms" (3rd Session 1982), R. Buragohain "Tai Ahom State Formation" (5th Session 1984), Jahnvi Gogoi, "Some Methods in Agriculture of Medieval NEI" (7th Session 1986), to give only a few examples. Manorama Sharma too has briefly examined the Ahom system, in *Social and Economic Change in Assam : Middle Class Hegemony*, (New Delhi 1990). However, none of them have been able to adequately explain the mode of production in the Ahom state.

With a view to overcoming these shortcomings in the study of the history Assam during the Ahom period, it was decided to review the developments during the period with the aforementioned perspective. In other words, the objective of this research was to study the Ahom state and trace the process of its evolution by examining the technological inputs, production relations, surplus production and appropriation and social formations, while also making use of the retrogressive method of examining historical situations, and in the process provide credible explanations to the process of historical change, as evidenced in the evolution of the Ahom state.

Here it may be opportune to have a word about the retrogressive method of history, as it is felt that this method of understanding history would greatly aid us in studying the Ahom period. The retrogressive method of history is usually associated with the name of Marc Bloch who advocated the method of "understanding the past by the present"¹ Though it is commonly assumed that "misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past"² at the same time it is also equally true that it would be fruitless to try and understand the past by being totally ignorant of the present. As Bloch states "It would be a grievous error, indeed, to think that the order which historians adopt for their enquires must necessarily correspond to the sequence of events. Even though they restore its true direction afterwards, they have often benefited at the outset by

¹ Marc Bloch, *Historians Craft*, tr. Peter Putnam, Manchester, 1984 reprint

² *Loc.cit.*

reading history, as Maitland said, 'backwards'.³ This method is also keeping with the natural progression of research which seeks to move from the better known areas to the lesser known areas. For instance, the present names and terms used to describe ancient ideas and or vanished forms of social organization would be rendered meaningless when viewed minus their historical context. In this regard Bloch says that "the most illustrious among us have occasionally made strange mistakes through having neglected to pursue a prudently retrogressive method whenever and wherever it was indicated"⁴ Example is given of Fustel de Coulange's study to determine the 'origins' of the feudal system and the beginnings of serfdom, which apparently suffered from serious flaws due to his excessive dependence on second hand information and his inability to go backward in time to determine the true nature of institutions.⁵

Without losing perspective of the basic objective of seeking to understand and explain *change* in the historical process, the retrogressive method merely seeks to enhance the process by seeking to understand the historical process backwards. As Bloch succinctly explains, "...it is change the historian is trying to grasp. But in the film which he is examining, only the last pictures remain quite clear. In order to reconstruct the faded features of the others, it behoves him first to unwind the spool in the opposite direction from that in which the pictures were taken"⁶

³ *ibid.*, p 45

⁴ *ibid.* pp.45-46

⁵ *ibid.* p. 46

⁶ *Loc.cit.*

In our study of the Ahom state, we have taken the examples of agricultural practices, tools and technology, climatic conditions, soil fertility and pH factor, social institution *et al* of the later periods and sought to trace them back to the Ahom period. This has been done, keeping in mind the traditions of the retrogressive method wherein it is held that "a society, like a mind, is woven of perpetual interaction"⁷ and that it would be possible to arrive at a fairly accurate picture of the early Ahom period by relying greatly on exhaustive British records that overlapped the later Ahom period. Moreover, much of the data taken from this period pertains to climate, rainfall, topography, rice breeds, tools and technology etc. Here it may be mentioned that changes in the areas of climatic conditions, topography, genetic changes in breeds of cultivable plants and food crops, take place over thousands and thousands of years. Hence examining data of a latter period and going back a few hundred years, logically, should not give very erroneous results.

While doing so, the work has sought to examine the basic formative factors of a society in a scientific way, through an examination of technology, modes of production, production relations and social formations, and how changes in these factors contributed towards the larger process of historical evolution.

Data included both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consisted of examination of the historical remains, which included

⁷ Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, London, 2nd edition 1962, p59

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extensive field trips to the areas of maximum concentration of Ahom ruins and remains namely the districts of upper Assam, and especially Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Dibrugarh districts, examination of palaces, buildings, tanks, artefacts, tools and weapons, including those in the museums and private collections, survey of folk, cultural and oral traditions extant in many rural areas of Assam. Another invaluable source has been the *Buranjis*, the unique Ahom tradition of maintaining chronicles on the events of the time. In addition, the writings of foreign writers, including those of the Mughals, the Portuguese and the British, in different periods of time, provide gainful insights to the time, on the basis of being first hand reports on the Ahom state during various stages of its evolution. Such information when corroborated with other sources such as the *Buranjis* and folk traditions, and when at times, subjected to the practice of drawing ethnographic parallels, does beautifully combine to provide tremendous information on the subject. Another source of information has been the religious and quasi religious texts such as the *Kalika Purana*, the *Joginitantra* and the *Katha Guru charits*. The British records also provided invaluable information.

The secondary sources have included the numerous works, both published and unpublished, on the Ahom state, commentaries on technology, geography and agriculture, the concepts of social change and the works on social formations.

The thesis has been organized under a chapterisation scheme that has the first chapter introducing the work. This chapter provides an introduction

to the theme and scope of study which is envisaged and is divided into four sections. The first section provides a broad perspective of history and historical writing and the problem of explaining historical change. The second section provides an overview of the Ahom state. The third section, a review of the earlier works done on the subject is undertaken. In the process, the shortcomings of the earlier works are also examined and thereby the need for a fresh enquiry into the subject is underscored. The last section provides a brief summary of the objectives of the work, the methodology adopted and the organization of the chapters.

The Second the chapter discusses the issue of mode of production and technology, with specific emphasis on examining its general perspectives as well as prospects. This chapter ponders at the journey of mankind through the ages, from that of a being who did not know the use of fire to someone who splits the atom to harness its energy ! Wondering whether it would be possible to explain such development or the process of historical change in a substantive manner. It is also sought to be examined whether historical change is explained by linking it to the spontaneous self expression of the spirit, or thorough a process of dialectics, as variously manifested, at different times, such as *yin* and *yang*, love and hate, thesis and anti-thesis, challenge and response etc.

In the second section, an attempt is made to provide an overview of the mode of production and technology perspectives. In addition, it is also

examined whether, the mode of production and technology perspective would help in our effort at understanding the dynamics of historical change.

The third chapter looks at the process of evolution of the early Ahom state with a special reflection on its technology. This chapter examines the historical and ethnic background of the Ahoms. This is then linked to their heritage of river valley habitation and their technology of cultivation, such as their familiarity with the use of animal drawn ploughs and wet rice cultivation. This is contrasted to the existing tribes of Upper Assam and their level of technology.

A survey of the topography, and the division of Assam into distinct zones, the habitation pattern of the various communities, with whom the Ahom came into contact, the differences in their technology leading to their occupation of the different zones, hence the relative absence of Ahom clashes with the earlier inhabitants, are some of the interesting findings of this chapter.

The fourth chapter examines the early Ahom state including its mode of production and also includes a review of the social formations. This chapter examines how technology and modes of production are influenced by the physical conditions and in order to understand the system of production and the nature of social formations in the early Ahom state, first an effort is made to understand the peculiar physical conditions that prevailed in the area. Interestingly, in order to do this, we have proceeded on the premise that a few hundred years is not very significant in the geological time frame,

and hence inferences such as temperature, rainfall, soil types, micro nutrients available in the soil, the soil pH factor etc, are done on the basis of British records of the 19th century, and present day agricultural researches.

In the process we also found that the much-maligned system of *jhumming* was the best possible technological innovation that could be effectively utilized for agriculture in the peculiar conditions prevailing in the hill areas. Moreover, the need for effective hydraulic control in the Brahmaputra valley, such as land reclamation and effective flood protection, became possible only on the basis of the unique social formation of the Ahom state, the *paik* system. Interestingly, the system in the early stages was largely based on the kin ties, such as the *phoid* or the extended family or clan, and the Ahom system was largely egalitarian in nature.

Chapter five makes an attempt to review the technology in the Ahom state with special reference to agriculture. This chapter looks at the importance of rice cultivation and the details of the tools and implements used in agriculture. In addition, the soil dynamics and the intricacies of wet paddy cultivation and how it helps in the process of nutrient absorption by the plant and the process of soil regeneration, the various varieties of paddy, and their adaptive capability to unique ecological conditions, such as floods, are also looked into. Another interesting area of study in this chapter has been an examination of the processes of rice extraction from paddy and the method of parboiling which led to greater food value for rice. In addition, the



intimate connection between wet paddy cultivation; a high soil pH factor and fish production is also examined in some detail.

Chapter six deals with the examination of the non agrarian technology that prevailed in the Ahom State. This chapter looks at military technology, the system of mobilizing militia, the existence of a strong Ahom navy, the various techniques of boat making, the Ahom system of fortifications, the tradition of guns and gun powder, the high energy food available to the soldiers, the Ahom system of torture and psychological warfare, etc.

The chapter also looks into the Ahom system of civil constructions, the buildings, roads and bridges, and the practice of excavating huge tanks.

Chapter seven reviews the technological changes and social formation in the later Ahom state. This chapter looks at how expansion of the Ahom state, especially from the sixteenth century onwards, and the influx of new technology, such as better bows, and artillery, contributed to the strength of the monarchy, and social formations of the period.

Interestingly, the new social formations were indicative of changes creeping into the economy, thus resulting in greater use of coins during business transactions, increase in trade, beginnings of small towns, growth of the *satra* institution, changes in the *paik/khel* system, and the eventual inability of the system to resolve internal contradictions resulting in a series of peasant uprisings, known as the Moamoria rebellions.

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The last chapter of this work is the epilogue. This chapter seeks to draw suitable conclusions based on the study of the evolution of the Ahom state through various stages. After having traced the development of the Ahom state and having examined its basic features, we endeavoured to establish whether the conclusions regarding the general Indian historical pattern was applicable in the case of Assam. The Asiatic Mode of Production, was examined in its basic format, and the reasons why it was found unsuitable for the Indian condition were also examined. By contrasting those findings to the situation in Ahom Assam, we were led to the conclusion that the only acceptable categorization in the case of Assam would be neither the Feudal nor the Asiatic Mode of Production, but the *Paik* Mode of Production. Why this conclusion is arrived at, is discussed in detail.

Chapter VIII

Epilogue

Having traced the evolution of the Ahom state through the various stages of its evolution, we are now in a position to try and categorise it by determining its dominant mode of production. Interestingly, this would lead us to the centre stage of the raging debate of whether India can be categorised under the Asiatic Mode of Production or whether it had feudalism or not. Here, it needs mention that the debate about the Indian situation basically takes into account the historical developments of North and South India and does not take into account the peculiarities of developments in this region. It was precisely due to this shortcoming that we had originally conceived of focussing the microscope, on the historical developments in this part of the country, with particular reference to the Ahom state, and ascertain whether the generalisations that had been made regarding the rest of India would hold true here also. Whether, the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP), generally dismissed as inapplicable in the rest of India, would be relevant in the case of Assam, or whether the feudalism debate could be extended to include historical developments here. Such a proposal had been made forwarded for M'Phil research in 1993 followed by a wider research proposal on the same theme, for PhD in 1994, which

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envisaged a study of the Technological Changes and Mode of Production in the Evolution of the Ahom State. Subsequently, there was a paper ¹ which has also attempted, though in a perfunctory manner, to subject to scrutiny the medieval history of Assam on the basis of the Asiatic Mode of Production. Interestingly, even earlier researchers such as Romesh Buragohain ² had made brief references to the Ahom state, the Asiatic Mode of Production and feudalism, without however going into any great detail or discussion on the subject.

For clarity of discussion, we shall recall the basic thrusts of the arguments regarding the Asiatic Mode of Production. In the process, it is hoped that the basic parameters would emerge so that it would be easier to compare the situation existing in the Ahom state, and thereby arrive at some justifiable conclusions.

The Concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production:

Interestingly, the concept of the peculiarity of Asian growth pattern did not have its origin in Marx formulating his celebrated Asiatic Mode of Production theory. It was merely the reflection of a mindset that found currency in many writings of the period. Adam Smith had emphasised on the role of the state in maintaining hydraulic works for irrigation and navigation

¹ Sajal Nag, "The Socio Economic Base of Medieval Assam in the light of the Asiatic Mode of Production" *NEHU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol.1, No.1 Jan-Jun 1998 pp.31-45

² Romesh Buragohain, *op.cit.*, p127 ff.

in Egypt, India and China.³ Even during the fourteenth century, the concept about the absence of private property in land consequently giving rise to despotism in Asia, was a persistent theme among European thinkers.⁴ With the writings of several European travellers to India in the seventeenth century, such as Sir Thomas Roe, Jean Tavernier and especially Francois Bernier, the trend got intensified, with assertions such as the oriental sovereign being the master of all land in his domain.⁵ As Mukhia comments, it is likely that Marx derived his notion from Bernier, though he was aware of the controversy among the British administrators regarding the nature of land rights in India.⁶ Mukhia also traces the growth of the concept of the isolated villages communities and each being economically and administratively self governing units characterised by the unity of agriculture and handicrafts production to its pre Marxian roots. He writes that while the notion of the self sustaining village society had been advanced by Mark Wilkins⁷ and was taken up by the *Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company* in 1812, it was Richard Jones who first developed the

³ Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London, 1975, pp.466ff. and Marian Sawyer, *Marxism and the Question of the Asiatic Mode of Production*, The Hague, 1977, p.29 as quoted in Harbans Mukhia, *Perspectives on Medieval History*, New Delhi reprint 1996 p.71

⁴ Harbans Mukhia, *Perspectives on Medieval History*, op.cit., p. 71

⁵ Thomas Roe, *Journal*, in *Churchill's Collective Voyages* Vol.I, London 1732, p.729; Tavernier, *Travels in India*, Vol.I, New Delhi, 1977 p. 260 etc as quoted in Harbans Mukhia, op.cit, p 71

⁶ Harbans Mukhia, op. cit., p 71

⁷ Mark Wilkins, *Historical Sketches of the South of India* London, 1810 Vol. I, pp. 117 f,

notion of the unity between agriculture and handicrafts, as observed by Lawrence Krader,⁸ This theme was then elaborated by Marx in *Capital*.⁹

Here, it would be certainly pertinent to take a look at some of the important assertions of the Asiatic Mode of Production as conceived by Marx. At the very beginning one cannot but agree with the contention of Kate Currie¹⁰ that in terms of sheer depth systematisation, consistency, detail and accuracy, the Asiatic Mode of Production does not bear comparison to the comprehensive and extended structural analysis of the Capitalist Mode of Production. But at the same time, this concentrated structured approach is not quite replicated in the other identified modes of production as well.¹¹ Interestingly, the term Asiatic Mode of Production was used by Marx only on two occasions (*Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital I*) and Engels not even on one occasion, yet they seem to have held steadfast to their position regarding the major features that characterised this mode of production.¹² In fact, the Asian situation variously referred to as 'Asian Form', 'Asiatic Societies', 'Asiatic Empires', 'Oriental Despotism', 'Indian Communities' etc., are referred to in various writings as the articles in the New York Daily Tribune of 1853, the *Grundrisse*, *Anti-Duhring*, the Volumes of the *Capital* and of

⁸ Lawrence Krader, *The Asiatic Mode of Production: Sources, Development & Critique in the Writings of Karl Marx*, Assen, 1975 pp. 53-55.

⁹ Harbans Mukhia, *op.cit.*, p 84

¹⁰ Kate Currie, *Beyond Orientalism*, Calcutta 1996

¹¹ *ibid.*, p 32

¹² Harbans Mukhia, *op.cit.*, pp. 70-71

course his celebrated *Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*.

Without going into the intricacies of the debate regarding the development of the idea of the Asiatic Mode of Production as reflected in the various writings, the stages about the evolution of it as a concept¹³, or whether there exists a dialectical account of transition to or from the AMP¹⁴, we would perhaps do well to confine ourselves at this stage, to the broad arguments on the concept as a whole.¹⁵

The AMP as a concept has been variously examined, both on theoretical veracity and by actually contrasting it with the situation that prevailed in India and most writers have generally termed it as being theoretically untenable¹⁶ and also inapplicable to the Indian situation. No doubt, as Romila Thapar succinctly puts across, the fact about the strange paradox of the historian who is concerned professionally with the past, playing a crucial role in the future of the society that he is studying, and at the same time, acknowledging the influence the contemporary settings has on his thought process, had their influence in our analysis of the AMP. She writes "Historical interpretation can therefore become a two way process where, the needs of the present are read into the past, and where the image

untenable
inapplicable

¹³ Ashok Rudra, *op.cit.*, p 28 f.

¹⁴ Kate Currie, *op.cit.*, pp. 33 ff.

¹⁵ Details of the AMP has been discussed in Chapter II

¹⁶ T.J.Byres "The Nature and Significance of the Debate" in T.J.Byres and Harbans Mukhia,(ed.) *Feudalism and Non European Societies*, London, 1985, p.12

of the past is sought to be imposed upon the present. The image of the past is the historian's contribution to the future"¹⁷

Interestingly, most discussions of the AMP model have been coloured by the frequent attempts to use the concept or portions of it, such as the unchanging character of the east, to either lend credence to the present or to fit the past into a stereotyped bracket, and justify historical developments. It was a handy tool in the hands of the British to justify imperialism and also promote evangelisation in India.¹⁸ This trend was held to be indicative of the Eurocentric mindset and this probably led to a conscious attempt by many of the writers to avoid the trappings of such biases. This prompted historians such as Anderson rails against reducing 'Asian development' to a residual category 'left over after the canons of European evolution have been established'.¹⁹ While the arguments of Hindess and Hirst²⁰ attempts to question the theoretical validity of the concept when rents and taxes coincide or a situation where the state is both landlord and sovereign. They argue that it is not possible to deduce an articulated combination of forces and relations of production. Moreover, as both the forces and relations of production would then combine as a single unit to determine the mode, and the tax/rent factor could be conjoined with either the forces of independent cultivation or communal cultivation. A scenario that was found both untenable and

¹⁷ Romila Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice*, New Delhi, 1975, reprint 1990, p. 1

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 9 ff.

¹⁹ Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London, 1974, pp. 548-549

²⁰ B.Hindess and P. Hirst, *Mode of Production and Social formation: An Auto Critique of Pre Capitalist Modes of Production*, London, 1977 and *Pre Capitalist Modes of Production*, London, 1975

unacceptable. Hence, it was argued that the mode was theoretically invalid.

Or in other words, their assumption about the absence of a unitary articulation of forces and relations of production invalidates the mode.²¹

Heinz Lubasz on the other hand, makes a sweeping remark that 'Marx did not attempt to conceptualise production in Asia at all.'²² He opines that 'the Asiatic mode of production is the equivalent of the family : it is primitive communism'²³, and hence the concept as a whole, represents but Marx's attempt to undercover the hypothetical roots of capitalist society, his area of special interest!

Indian writers too, have been strong and vociferous in their opposition to the attempted stereotyping of Indian development under the AMP which included such generalisations as that of *Oriental Despotism*.²⁴ Among the first to find the concept inapplicable in the Indian scenario was D.D.Kosambi. He remarked that 'Indian history does not fit precisely into this rigid framework'²⁵. Moreover, the entire country cannot be treated as a homogenous unit, as 'not all parts of the country were simultaneously in the same stage'²⁶ He also maintains that 'it is impossible to find slavery in the classical European sense in India ... (and) the importance of chattel slavery in

²¹ Kate Currie, *op.cit.*, pp. 47-48

²² *ibid.*, pp. 48ff.

²³ Heinz Lubasz, "Marx's Concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production : A Genetic Analysis", in *Economy and Society*, volume 13, number 4, 1984, pp. 458-459

²⁴ Romila Thapar, *op.cit.*, p 10

²⁵ D.D.Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, New Delhi, 1991 reprint, p23

²⁶ *Loc.Cit.*,

the relations of production and as a supply of labour for production was negligible²⁷ The Unchanging nature of the East, or the obvious lack of dynamism and change in Asiatic also cannot be historically substantiated. As Kosambi remarked, 'the very formation of a village economy with the plough used on fixed plots of land implies a tremendous advance in the means of production'²⁸

On the other hand, Habib views with a great deal of suspicion the intents of the western scholars in the revived interest in the concept of the Asiatic mode. He feels that it is intended primarily 'to deny the role of class contradictions and class struggles in Asian societies and to emphasise the existence of the authoritarian and anti-individualistic traditions in Asia, so as to establish that the entire past history of social progress belongs to Europe alone, and thereby belittle the revolutionary lessons to be drawn from the recent history of Asia'²⁹

Apart from this opposition to the practice of conveniently using certain unacceptable generalisations about the Indian situation contained in the AMP model, which were conveniently used to further the cause of imperialism, historians have also found fault with many of the assumptions of the model on the whole. The arguments on which the AMP model had been found unacceptable for the Indian context, largely meaning north and central

²⁷ *Loc.cit.*,

²⁸ *ibid.*, p 16

²⁹ Irfan Habib, "Problems of Marxist Historical Analysis" in K.M. Kurian ed. *India State and Society - A Marxian Approach*, New Delhi, 1975 p. 28

India, has already been discussed in detail.³⁰ Let us however, look at the concept of regional variation with particular reference to the situation in Ahom Assam.

The existence of strong arguments, some of which we have examined, as to why the AMP categorisation is not suitable for India, had led to an attempt to try and possibly bracket the Indian situation under the feudal category³¹. But there have been arguments that the concept of feudalism too is inapplicable to the Indian situation³². Under these circumstances, how do we categorise the Indian situation if at all? Moreover, in the light the acknowledgements that most studies into the Indian situation concentrated primarily on north and central India, and did not take into cognisance of regional variations, would it be possible to bracket a regional variant, say the Ahom state under the AMP model?

Interestingly, it is also held that a uniform pattern of growth pertaining to all the regions of India may not be quite possible. Infact, the absence of such a uniform pattern of growth that would find applicability in the different regions of India, had prompted Kosambi to declare the AMP model unacceptable.³³

Studies have been conducted to examine regional variations, However, most of these have been confined to studying the south Indian

³⁰ See Chapter II of this work

³¹ R.S.Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, first published 1965, 2nd Edition reprint 1990, Macmillan India, Madras

³² Harbans Mukhia, "Was There Feudalism in Indian History?" *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol.8, No 3, April 1981, pp.273-210

³³ D.D.Kosambi, *op.cit.*, p23

situation. For instance, Stein³⁴ while emphasising the importance of recognising and acknowledging regional diversity has concentrated on developments in south India. The question of regional variation has also been taken note of earlier, by Gough³⁵ who seems to find application for both the AMP and the feudal mode in different areas of India. She argues that the AMP model is applicable in the case of Thanjavur from the 1st to the 14th century A.D. a variant of the feudal mode prevailed in some of the smaller Kerala states on the west coast periphery.³⁶ Some of the conclusions arrived at by Stein also merits serious attention, such as that in the medieval south Indian society, the basic system of agrarian production and property continued to be communal in the sense that productive resources were vested in corporate peasant groups. Mastery over productive means was not individual and productive resources were pooled and distributed customarily by the headman. Moreover the system remained segmentary with localised chieftainship ruling small areas united together as a state through ritual forms. In addition, he also dismisses the role of towns and money as being active agents in altering fundamental agrarian relations.³⁷ Unfortunately, this

³⁴ Burton Stein, "the Deconstruction of Feudalism" in T.Byres and Harbans Mukhia ed. *Feudalism and Non European Societies*, London 1985 pp. 54-86

³⁵ Kathleen Gough, "Dravidian Kinship and Modes of Production", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 13, 1979, pp.265-291

- "Modes of Production in Southern India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.15, Feb.1980, pp.337-364

³⁶ Kate Currie, *op.cit.*, p.60

³⁷ Stein, *op.cit.*, p 82

does not lead him to any concrete conclusions on the specific type of social formation he finds in the case of south India.³⁸

It would be interesting indeed to examine the situation in Ahom Assam, analyse the pattern of historical developments in this region, and see whether the AMP model would be applicable here. As was previously done, wherein the fundamental parameters of the AMP model were contrasted with the situation that prevailed in central and north India, here too, the Ahom state would be examined in the light of those same basic parameters.

a) Hydraulic culture and state intervention : One of the primary formulations of the AMP relates to the emphasis on the almost symbiotic relationship between agriculture and irrigation. As a result of this relation, the volume of irrigation required was of a stupendous nature, something which only the state could fulfil. As state intervention for the purpose of irrigation and hence by extension agriculture, was a must, it laid the ground for the growth of despotism. In our discussion on the reasons why the AMP was found inapplicable for the Indian condition as such, a basic theme of argument against it was on the point of irrigation. While writers such as Thapar had dismissed the role of state controlled irrigation having played a major role in the all India level, Mukhia has emphasised the role of individuals and small communities in irrigation and has dwelt on the technology that made it feasible. The possible exception was south India, but

³⁸ *ibid.*, p.82ff.

in this case, the other relevant relations of production were not adequately examined to enhance the debate.

In the case of Assam, as we have already seen, the complex interplay of a number of factors gave rise to an altogether new situation, quite unlike other parts of India. The state, especially the river valleys, had a fertile soil, with a high pH factor, that was extremely suitable for wet rice cultivation and fish rearing. Secondly, the state not only falls under a high rainfall area, but is also endowed with a number of rivers and streams which includes the mighty Brahmaputra, one of the biggest waterways of the world. Hence, in the true sense of the term, Assam's agriculture was not at all dependent on artificial irrigation on any large scale. Hence, the question of state intervention to provide irrigation could hardly exist. But interestingly, state intervention was indeed called for in other areas of hydraulic control. As we have seen, most of Assam is a flat alluvial plain, prone to frequent flooding and inundation's from its many rivers. During the time of the Ahom entry into upper Assam in 1228 A.D., most of the cultivable land was probably swamps and marshes. Hence the first task to which the Ahoms had to apply themselves, was to drain the swamps and marshes and reclaim the land for agriculture. This task was not only difficult and labour intensive, but had to be complemented with effective flood control measures by erecting bunds and embankments. Hence, it is no co-incidence that Ahom Assam was criss-crossed with an incredible network of bunds, and embankments, many of which also doubled up as roads. These jobs required a very large organisation and the only option was

state intervention. The Ahom state devised a unique labour exploitation mechanism called the *paik* system, that made it compulsory, barring certain exceptions, for every adult male, and perhaps also adult female, within the age group of 15 to 50 years to render compulsory state service. The *paiks* were organised into a squad comprising of four *paiks* called a *got*. Each *paik* had to render state service on a rotation basis for three or four months. The first member of the levy was termed the *mul*, the second the *dowal* and the third levy the *tewal*. Though normally only one levy of the *got* was mobilised for state service, in times of emergencies, upto three members of the *got* could be in a state of mobilisation. The compulsory nature of the labour exploitation mechanism does indicate an element of despotism in the Ahom state mechanism. However, when the compulsory aspect is seen in conjunction with the provision whereby, it was mandatory for the *paiks* who had not been called to service, to look after the fields and similar household duties of the other members of his *got* who had been mobilised; a new dimension to the relations of production definitely emerges. For one, it not only ensured that the process of production continued without a break despite the state laying a claim on the labour of its subjects, on the other hand it reinforced the element of community co-operation in the state system.

In effect, it was the *paik* system which also gave rise to the unique property relations in Assam. The basic essence of the concept of land ownership is beautifully summed up by an old Thai proverb *Din an nha, na han muong*, roughly meaning that the land is the property of the chief of the

muong, while the paddy fields are the property of the entire *muong* or community.³⁹ In other words, land was categorised into two broad divisions, paddy fields and other lands. While land other than paddy fields are treated as the property of the chief, the paddy fields are collectively owned by the community. In return for three or four months of compulsory service to the state, each *paik* was allocated two puras (about 2.66 acres) of *rowati* or rice land and land for his homestead and garden. Private ownership of land extended as far as the homestead and garden or as otherwise specified by royal grants (a feature more apparent in the later Ahom state). Other lands especially paddy fields were communally owned and reverted back to the state when the user became over aged or died.

At the same time, it was also seen that the land allocated for homesteads and gardens were normally located at higher elevations than the normal lay of the land hence they probably did not entail community effort at reclamation, unlike the paddy fields which were not only reclaimed with strenuous community labour in draining of marshes but also had to be continuously maintained with collective effort at flood prevention. This would greatly explain the nature of the land rights.

The Ahom state displayed inklings of its overbearing nature over the production process through its strict enforcement of the *paik/khel* system.⁴⁰ Apart from having the system of compulsory labour to the state on a

³⁹ As discussed in detail in chapter IV

⁴⁰ As discussed in Chapter IV

rotation basis, in return for land, the other important feature of the Ahom state was the *khel* system whereby the population was divided on the basis of their occupation and crafts. Though initially, it was organised on the basis of the extended family, the clan or the *phoid*, in time it began to resemble trade or craft guilds. It appears that the production of goods were normally dictated by the needs of the state and the state could reorganise, relocate and also fix production targets of the various *khels*. This factor proved particularly helpful during times of war and other national emergencies whereby the entire production could be geared towards meeting the emergency, such as building of war boats, guns and gunpowder, bows and arrows etc.

With the entire process of production more or less under state control, the Ahom state especially in the early period, that is, upto the fifteenth century, displayed a high degree of self sufficiency. As has been noticed earlier, all occupational groups be it gold washers or craftsmen, all had agriculture as their secondary occupation. In addition, unlike other parts of India, agriculture was never designated as an inferior occupation, and even the royalty often took part in it. Moreover, the concept of self sufficient village communities would have more than an iota of truth in the case of Assam. For one, each family produced its own food grains, while the plentiful fish supply provided even the humblest cultivator with enough protein in his diet. Secondly, the women in each household were expected to

weave the required fabrics.⁴¹ The only commodity not readily available was salt, which was partly overcome by devising a method of burning plantain and using the ash, or alkali and locally called *khar* or bartering with the hill tribes to obtain rock salt especially from the Naga hills.

Interestingly, there was a complete absence of minted money from the 13th to the 15th century. There was also an absence of towns and urban centres, that other parts of India witnessed, probably due to the relative absence of trade. The Mughal accounts of Assam during this period testify to the absence of markets, even in the Ahom capital, where the only items being bought and sold seems to have been betel leaves ! The Mughal writers qualify this lack of markets to the Assamese practise of storing a years stock of food grains in their households.

A gradual change in the structure of the Ahom state is apparent from the 16th century onwards. It was seen that during this period new technological inputs, especially in the department of warfare, lead to a strengthening of the state and its expansion westwards.⁴² With the expansion of the state into what is known as lower Assam, it came into contact with more developed areas especially, in the Koch Hajo region. Interestingly, the pace and patterns of economic developments between upper and lower Assam were greatly dissimilar. It was seen that while mid and western Assam had a long legacy of settled wet rice cultivation and irrigation. It had also

⁴¹ As discussed in chapter V

⁴² As discussed in chapter VII

experienced trade, commerce and industry at a much more advanced level than the rest of the Ahom kingdom, especially upper Assam. In fact, most of upper Assam is said to have been brought under extensive wet rice cultivation by the Ahoms.⁴³ Hence, it is apparent that the amalgamation of these two areas, mid and western Assam and upper Assam into the single entity of the Ahom state, in which the dominant mode of production was the *paik* system, would give rise to many contradictions. As mentioned, the new areas incorporated into the Ahom state, not only had a more developed economy, but also had a higher level of economic specialisation and greater intercourse with the outside world.

During this time, we have the interesting spectacle of the edifice of the Ahom state resting primarily on the *pai/khel* system, but at the same time initiating certain modifications in the in the form and structure of the system. For instance, it was noticed that amount of land allotted to the *paik* in the Koch-Hajo area was more than what was allotted to *paiks* in upper Assam. This was probably done to make state service an attractive proposition. At the same time, the measure may have been designed to offset the comparative disadvantage a *paik* in these areas faced due to the relative scarcity of free highland in lower Assam as compared to upper Assam. This factor would curtail the ability of the *paik* in lower Assam to engage in dry rice cultivation in the free highland areas, unlike the *paik* in upper Assam. Also noticeable during this time was the trend of allowing commutation of

⁴³ *ibid.* p 75

compulsory state service in lieu of cash payment. With time this practice became more pronounced and as this adversely affected the functioning of the *paik* system, the state sought to curtail its growth, but with limited success.

The later Ahom state also witnessed the proliferation of land grants for religious purposes and the growth of the *satra* institution⁴⁴. In addition, the expansion in the boundaries of the Ahom state, also saw the emergence of frontier governors, such as the Sadiya khowa Gohain, the Marangi Khowa Gohain etc, there was also the growth of vassal states during this period.⁴⁵ The frontier governors as well as the vassal states were expected to provide the state with armed levies during times of war. The strength of these levies were normally fixed, especially in the case of the frontier governors. It was also seen that there was a growing trade, in the later Ahom period and gold coins were also being regularly struck and the Ahom mint was also continuously at work. The growth of craft centres such as Sarthebari, and Sualkuchi testify to the growth in economic activities creating the trend for the growth of towns and urban centres.

These changes, though subtle, were beginning to chip away at the edifice of the centralised and overwhelming structure of the Ahom state. That this system rested primarily on the *paik* system of production was apparently realised and there were repeated attempts to modify, and enforce the *paik* system strictly. Repeated surveys and censuses, and state moves to

⁴⁴ As discussed in Chapter VII

detect *paiks* who were evading state service, and who were joining the *satras* to do so, became the order of the day.

Under these circumstances, the Momamoria rebellions can be seen as peasant rebellions against the despotic Ahom state structure, which was slowly emerging as untenable in the face of slow yet fundamental changes in the economy. Though the later Ahom state did make some attempts to modify itself to the changing situation, by introducing land surveys, through use of standardised measurement rods, on the Mughal model and importing expert professional surveyors from Bengal, making revenue payable in cash, allowing commutation of *paik* service in lieu of money payment etc, yet, the dominant mode of production continued to be the *paik* system.

Interestingly, it is common to encounter such sweeping generalisations that the situation in Assam was actually feudal in character, and efforts have also been made to trace the transition from 'tribalism to feudalism'⁴⁶ Frequent use of terms such as 'feudal relations' 'feudal institutions' etc leads one to believe that that feudalism in Assam was an established fact. But in reality, not much of attention has been given towards examining the actual conditions that prevailed and contrasting them with some of the yardsticks of the feudal mode of production. Guha even goes on to highlight the manorial aspect of production process, and the practice of the king, the nobles and favoured priests holding tax free private agricultural

⁴⁵ As discussed in Chapter VII

⁴⁶ Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*, *op.cit.*, pp. 82-97

farms cultivated by slaves and attached serfs. But at the same time he also admits that such slaves and serfs hardly accounted for ten percent or even less of the entire population.⁴⁷

It appears that Guha had sought to tailor his arguments to fit his preconceived idea of the evolution of the polity form "Tribalism to Feudalism", the title of his chapter.⁴⁸ Thus he argues that "the society...continued to be feudal in its essence, both in its political and manorial aspects"⁴⁹ but at the same time also arguing that the percentage of serfs and slaves working in rent free estates would be hardly 10% or less. By trying to adopt the concept of feudalism to study and explain the situation pertaining to the Ahom state, but choosing to apply the concept in fragments, Guha has only succeeded in greatly confusing the issue. Interestingly, the Ahom state did not have a comprehensive and well developed system of revenue collection, instead it was more tuned towards enforcing corvee labour. The state also never had a standing army worth its name. Thus, Guha, by failing to establish clearly whether feudalism was indeed the dominant mode of production, and instead merely suggesting that the situation represented a transition from tribalism to feudalism, seems to have succumbed to an over simplification of historical developments.

On the other hand, Sajal Nag's attempt to scrutinise developments in Medieval Assam 'in the light of the Asiatic Mode of Production'⁵⁰ has

⁴⁷ *Loc.cit.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, chapter 5

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p 89

⁵⁰ Sajal Nag, *op.cit.*, pp.31-45

proved to be perfunctory and suffering from serious lacunae. He has entirely missed the basic relations of the essence of the Ahom land relations, by stating that “under the Ahoms lands of all denominations ultimately belonged to the Crown who represented the state”⁵¹ As we have seen in chapter IV, the concept of community ownership of land especially of rice fields was very strong, and each *paik* was entitled to receive two *puras* of wet rice field in addition to land required for his homestead and garden. The peasant was also entitled to communal grazing land, and land cleared of his own initiative for cultivation of highland rice and other items, without state interference, provided he was fulfilling his corvee obligations to the state. Moreover, if as Nag observes, all land belonged to the king, what would explain some incidents reported in the mid 16th century about a householder who successfully resists royal encroachment on his land, which was for the purpose of founding of a capital city!⁵² Interestingly, probably due to his lack of source material, Nag has used a number of unsubstantiated generalisations, many of which are totally unacceptable. For instance, without making any effort to place the developments in their historical settings, he writes “the Ahom king used to take the title of Swargadewa, or the Lord of Heaven. The role of ideologies can be understood from this. The rulers were constantly guided by the deity and the gohains, the sacred classes of people”. He has made no attempt to clarify which deity is he talking about, whether it is some deity of the traditional Tai religion, or some deity of the

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p 32

Hindu pantheon. Interestingly, the Gohains, at no point of time constituted a *sacred class of people*. The *Bor Gohain*, the *BuraGohain* and the *Barpatra Gohain* were the three chief councillors of the King, and did not constitute a sacred class. Yes, they belonged to the top Ahom nobility and belonged to the elite group of *Satgharia* Ahoms but these did not constitute even the priestly class, who were known as the *Deodhais*. Though one would have liked to believe that , probably he has confused Gosain with Gohain. The spiritual and temporal heads, especially of *satras* were often called *satradhikars* or *gosain* meaning lord. It was basically a term of address and did not in any way constitute a sacred class as such. However, there seems to be no confusion about the use of the term, as he has added that the “position of the spiritual heads like the gohains can be understood from the fact that the king’s succession and power had to be approved and legitimised by these gohains”⁵³

Though Nag seems to have found general acceptance for the AMP model in the case of Assam, he has done so without properly ascertaining facts. For instance, though he says that slavery was an important organ of social production, ⁵⁴he had made no attempt to substantiate it or show its actual position in the production process. While our studies have shown that though slavery existed it did not play any substantial role in the production process, and the estates of the nobles were tended more by *paiks* assigned by

⁵² *Satsari Asam Buranji*, *op cit.*, p. 20

⁵³ *ibid.*, p 39

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p41

the state for personal service to the nobles than by slaves. This is understandable on the basis of the fact that while the upkeep of the slaves would be the responsibility of its master, there was no such obligation with regards to the *paiks*. As we have shown, the growing trend of *paiks* being assigned to the personal service of nobles was creating a problem in the later stages. It is also not clear on what basis Nag makes such statements as “there is evidence enough to show the immobile character of the Assamese. Even the inter mingling of villages was virtually absent...In the Brahmaputra valley there was no form of transportation to carry people from one place to another. ..”⁵⁵ This seems to ignore that the extensive waterways of Assam had always been widely used for the means of easy and fast transport. Boats were a regular feature of the Ahom state⁵⁶ and there were exclusive *khels* or trade guilds assigned with the task of boat making and boat plying. Some of the boats mentioned are, *Bor Nao*, *Panchoi Nao*, *Chora Nao*, *Guthia Nao*, *Mar Nao*, *Hulung Nao*, *Magardia Nao* etc.⁵⁷ The Mughal writings on the period speak of innumerable boats that dot the rivers of Assam, and one particular Mughal writer personally witnessed about 32,000 boats having plied through Guwahati on a particular day⁵⁸. Apart from river transport, there was an extensive network of roads⁵⁹, which were made to mainly to connect the capital with important places. As the Ahoms had a total of five

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 35

⁵⁶ Dilip Kumar Buragohaim, “Communication Network During Ahom Period” in Sonaram Barua ed. *Buranjiye Porosa Rangpur*, Sibsagar, 2000, pp. 44-51

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p 44

⁵⁸ see chapter VI

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p44ff.

capitals , there existed an extensive network of roads. To take the example of the roads that ran from the capital at Rangpur, a chronicle ⁶⁰ records: "In Saka 1678, the 18th day of Puh, a Thursday, the king ordered the measurement of the distances of the various roads: (all length was recorded in *beo*, and 1 *beo* roughly equals 12 feet),

Length from Rangpur :

to Sonari river = 7500, to Gajpur =7500, to Dergaon = 6400,

to Jatia Ranga = 9500, to Nomali= 8000, to Biswanath= 7500, to Kaliabor= 8300,

to Hariah Tali = 8000, to Badua = 5000, to Pahari = 3500, to Beki = 6500,

to Kalsila =7500, to Bornadi = 6500, to Hajo = 9000.

The total number of resting camps was 13 and the total length of the route was 9,03,740 *beo*.⁶¹

In the light of these evidences, there is hardly any scope to assume that the Brahmaputa valley had practically no form of transportation to carry people from one place to another!

It is interesting to dwell on a supposition that had the Ahom state been left to its own devices, the prevalent *paik* system of production would have eventually broken up. Arguably the peasant rebellions termed as the Moamoria rebellions had begun that process of the break up of the existing system. Ultimately what form the new mode of production in the Ahom state would have assumed; would the subsequent developments have given rise to

⁶⁰ B.C.Handique, *Chang Rung Phukanor Buranji*, ,*op.cit.*, p27f.

a feudal mode, are probabilities that may be endlessly argued. But that the process of transformation in the *paik/khel* system of production had already started seems to be indicated by the growth of largely autonomous frontier governors and the growth in the institution of the *satras*. Interestingly, the *satras* did have inherent potential to replicate a feudal set-up. It had already incorporated certain aspects that resembled a feudal set up, such as a clearly defined hierarchy, a well organised system of revenue collection and appropriation. In addition, the *Satradhikar* or *Gosain*, being the head of the *satra* combined formidable economic and temporal powers to occupy a niche, that would compare favourably with a feudal lord !

Unfortunately, the natural flow of events were arrested by the arrival of the British leading to the subsequent colonisation of the state. We have seen that the technology and mode of production in the evolution of the Ahom state had its own peculiarities that does not allow it to be clubbed along with the historical developments in the rest of India. Probably, the attempts to make it conform to the all India pattern had led to efforts to try and place the Ahom state within the feudal mode, or on the other extreme, try and force it to fit the straight jacket of the stereotyped concept of the perceived Asiatic Mode of Production. As we have seen, both the attempts succeeded but in producing a grossly erroneous picture of actual developments in the Ahom state. To arrive at a clear understanding of the Ahom state, what we had done was to trace the evolution of the state, and

⁶¹ Dilip Kumar Buragohain, *op.cit.*, p.45.

and link each development to technology, production and production relations. In doing so, after identifying the major developments, we attempted to identify its dominant mode of production. In the process, it was been seen that the feudal mode of production was not the dominant mode of production in the Ahom state. At the same time, we also saw that the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) too had to be substantially modified to explain the Ahom production process. Thus, it appears that the term which may be the best suited to describe the Ahom state, is the *Paik* Mode of Production. It may be added that as a number of theoretical parameters of the AMP could not be applied to the Ahom case. At the same time, certain idiosyncratic features of the Ahom production process also emerged. Hence, the *Paik* Mode of Production seems the best term which can conclusively conceptualise Ahom technology and mode of production. The sequence of developments, reveal two broad phases of development of the Ahom state, which we have categorised as the early Ahom and the later Ahom state. In the early state, the overwhelming presence of the state system was quite apparent, and blood ties and kinship played an important role. Interestingly, during the later Ahom state, the influx of technology, led to a strengthening of the state, leading to its outward expansion, resulting in the incorporation of fresh ideas, and new occupational groups within its fold. There was a growth in trade, money circulation, and the gradual undermining of the *paik* system, the most important pillar of the Ahom state. The innate inability of the *Paik* mode of production to handle contradictions, which were greatly

unleashed with the forces of production beginning to change, but the relations of production remaining largely static, gave rise to further contradictions. The growth of alternative power structures, such as the *satras*, which had a production process separate from the *paik* system, may be seen as attempts to overcome the contradictions that had arisen in the mode of production in the Ahom state. However, the insistence of the state for the retention of the prevalent *paik* system, though with partial modifications, led to tension that promoted strife. Such developments were manifested in a series of peasant revolts known as the Moamoria rebellion. Rebellion from within, and onslaughts from abroad, such as the Burmese invasions, made the fall of the Ahom state only a matter of time. Hence, it was hardly surprising that the once powerful Ahom state collapsed in a heap, on to the hands of the British imperialists.