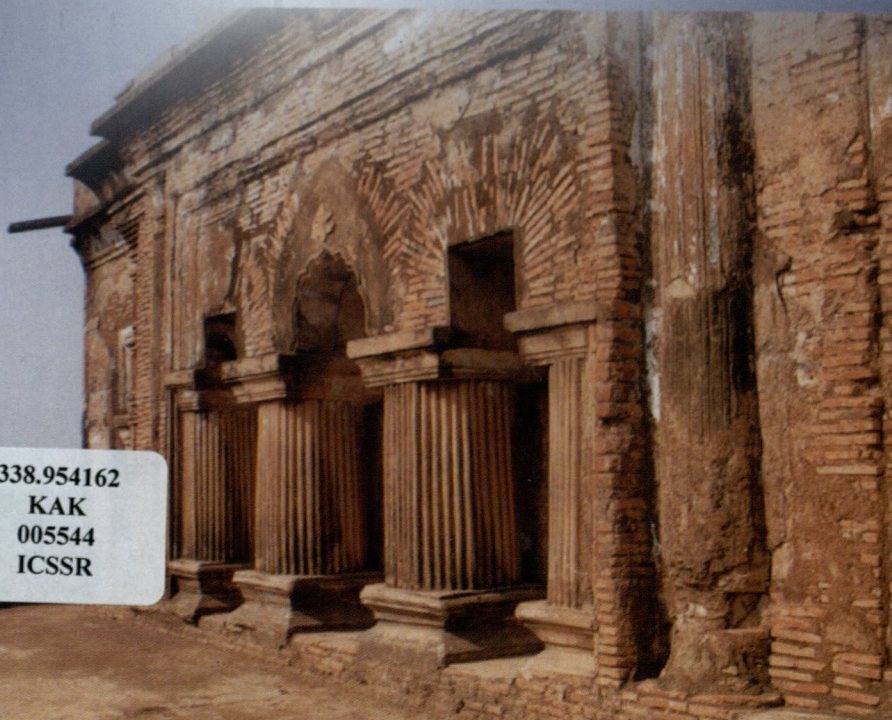


TECHNOLOGY, PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL FORMATION IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE AHOM STATE

Sanjeeb Kakoty

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Ahom rule in Assam is traced to A.D. 1228 when Sukapha, a prince of Shan origin established his kingdom in Assam. In time it emerged the most powerful kingdom that encompassed the major part of the region and halted the eastern onslaught of the Mughals beyond Bengal. Interestingly, Ahom rule lasted longer than that of the Mughals.

Though a lot of work has been done on the political history of the Ahoms, not much has been done to understand the true nature of the Ahom state, its economy, technology and production processes. By subjecting the Ahom state to a thorough review, and tracing the stages of its evolution, examining whether the parameters of feudalism or the Asiatic Mode of Production could be applied to the Ahom state, a lot of new insights on the Ahoms have emerged. The author's assertion that the Ahom system of production does not permit its categorisation under any known category and his attempt to categorise it as the Paik Mode of Production is a very interesting assertion and will surely initiate a serious debate on the issue.

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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 being 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. Unfortunately the concepts that were provided have been used much more for the exposition of theoretical polemics rather than as a scientific tool of social analysis. As a result, instead of understanding and explaining historical change, social evolution and revolution, with the help of these tools the accent seemed more towards making society conform to pre-determined water tight compartments. This often resulted in erroneous conclusions and an innate inability to explain historical change from a holistic perspective. A difference in approach may be noticed in the works, which are often labelled as a technological view of history. No matter what the label, they were able to inject a much-needed vibrancy to the study of history and the understanding of social change. 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*, Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, and Marc Bloch,

Feudal Society, 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*, At a general level, reference may also be made to the series of four volumes by J.D. Bernal, *Science in History*, Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (6 volumes), R.J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, (4 volumes), Charles Singer et al. (ed.), *History of Technology*, (5 volumes).

With regards to India, yeomen service have been rendered by writers such as R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India*, D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History, From Lineage to State*, Harbans Mukhia, *Perspectives on Medieval History*, Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* 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" and D.P. Chattopadhyay (ed.) *Studies in the History of Science in India* (2 vols.), G. Kuppuram and K. Kumudamoni (ed.) *History of Technology in India* (12 vols.), and Deepak Kumar (ed.) *Science and Empire*, 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*, Francis Hamilton,

An Account of Assam, J.P. Wade, *An Account of Assam*, John M'cosh, *Topography of Assam*, A.J. Moffatt Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India*, and specific works on the Ahoms, such as the works of U.N. Gohain, *Assam Under the Ahoms*, Padmeshwar Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*, Hiteshwar Barbor, *Ahomor Din*, S. Rajkumar, *Itihase Suwora Sokha Ta Bosor*, Lila Gogoi, (ed.) *The History of the System of Ahom Administration*, *Tai Sanskritir Ruprekha Herua Dinor Katha*, S.K. Bhuyan, *Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singha*, *Mir Jumlar Asam Akromon*, *Studies in the History of Assam*, *Anglo Assamese Relations (1771–1826)*, *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, N.K. Vasu, *Assam in the Ahom Age*, 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.

A welcome change has been the works of Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam*. 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 any comprehensive explanation regarding historical change or an adequate categorization of the Ahom state.

Dhrubajyoti Borah, *Moamoria Gana Abhyuthan and Itihase Chinta*, 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.

With a view to overcoming these shortcomings in the study of the history of 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 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 form 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

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 later 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.

A large mass of data is available on the Ahom period. Not only are there a lot of physical remains including ruins of palaces, buildings, tanks, artefacts, tools and weapons, especially in the area of maximum concentration of Ahom ruins and remains namely the districts of upper Assam, and especially Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Dibrugarh districts, there are also a lot of interesting items that stand preserved in museums and private collections. In addition is the wealth of information contained in the folk, cultural and oral traditions extant in many rural areas of Assam. Another invaluable source are the *Buranjis*, the unique Ahom tradition of maintaining chronicles on the events of the time. Another source of information has been the religious and quasi-religious texts such as the *Kalika Purana*, the *Joginitantra* and the *Katha Guru charits*. 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. The British records, on the basis of being first hand reports also provide invaluable data. Information obtained from various sources, when cross examined and corroborated with other sources and if at times also subjected to the practice of drawing ethnographic parallels, does beautifully combine to provide tremendous information on the subject. The challenge is to reduce this mass of information to a set of logical and coherent explanations about the flow of history in the Ahom state.

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