UNIT 8: SOCIETY, ECONOMY, RELIGION AND ADMINISTRATION OF MEDIEVAL ASSAM UNDER THE AHOMS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the social conditions during the Ahom Empire,
- explain the economy of the Ahom period,
- describe the religious traditions during the Ahom rule,
- illustrate the cult of Bhakti and Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam and its influence on the culture of Assam,
- discuss the Paik system, a unique feature of the Ahom administration.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will study the socio-religious and the economic conditions that existed during the rule of the Ahoms. In this unit we will also be able to understand the unique method started by the Ahoms in the matter of administration.

were Bodo-Kachari tribes. Among the Buddhist communities that migrated from the early part of the 18th century, the *Khamtis,* the *Doanahs*, the *Tai Phakes*, the *Turungs*, the *Aitonias* and the *Naras* formed small groups. The Muslim invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji also led to the settlement of the Muslims in the region.

The society of medieval Assam gave much space for the growth of art and architecture. The Ahom and Koch rulers rebuilt many of the old temples, built new ones and introduced new styles in the shape of an octagonal sanctum and beehive dome. They also initiated the widespread use of brick instead of stone blocks. The Neo-Vaishnava movement resulted in the development of the art of illustrated manuscripts patronised by the Ahom rulers and the Koch king. The *Hastirvidyarnama* is the most unique example of a painted manuscript among the secular branch of manuscript paintings.

Prior to the emergence of the Neo-Vaishnava movement Sanskrit was the main language but gradually Assamese took over and along with Sanskrit, Assamese language began to be used in land grants. Vernacular literature flourished under personalities like Madhava Kandali, Sankaradeva, Ananta Kandali, etc due to the patronage received from the Ahom kings . Sankaradeva's *Kirtana Ghosa*, *Rukmini Haran*, *Bhakti Ratnakara* are some classic works in the vernacular language. Assamese language and literature grew to a new height with works like *Satriya Vamsavalis* (chronicles of the Satras) and the *Charita Puthis* (Literature concerned with the lives of saints). Many secular writings also enriched the Assamese literature like Bakul Kayasthas' *Kitabat Manjuri*, Sridhar's *Sandhyakanda.* The *Buranjis* remain the greatest contribution of the Ahom rulers towards the literature of Assam.

Games and sports, dance and music were patronised by the Ahoms. Animal fights were the common pastimes. The appointment of *Senchowa Barua* (person in charge of training falcons), *Kukurachowa* Barua (trainer of cocks for cock fights) indicate the popularity of the above sports. Dance and music during agricultural festival like Bihu were celebrated, religious festivals like Durga worship due to the influence of Saktism were also

(ii) The earliest reference to the *Keots* is to be found in _____.

(iii) The *Nathayogis* and *Haris* are mentioned by _____.

(iv) The Ahoms followed the _____ system of marriage.

(v) The people at the lowest order were the _____.

(vi) The office of the *Barua*, *Hazarika*, *Saikia*, etc. was occupied by the _____ class.

8.4 ECONOMY

Agriculture remained the backbone of the economy during the Ahom period. The agricultural economy was a self sufficient one and the people never faced insecurity regarding food, except during trying times of war and natural calamities.

Village settlements were organized in such a manner that the families belonging to a particular profession and ethnic origin were settled together which is revealed by the names of the villages like *Tantikuchi*, *Kamarkuchi,* etc. The village life seemed very hard as the common man had to reel under the pressure both of paying taxes to the king in the form of manual labour as well as fighting during wars and at the same time they were required to pay their respect to the religious head of the *Satras* in the form of taxes.

There were urban centres at Rangpur, Garhgaon, Guwahati, Hajo, etc. which grew up as administrative, trading or religious centres.

Assam was rich in agricultural products as mentioned in the writings of the foreign travelers. Rice was cultivated on a large scale along with other agro based products like pulses, oil seeds, spices, mustard, poppy (as an intoxicant), bamboo, etc. Fruits like *thekera*, *owtenga, amara*, orange, lemon, etc. were very common. Shihabuddin Talish, mentions an alkali called *Khar* used by the local people as a substitute for salt. Names of places like *Banhbari*, *Jalukbari*, *Adabari*, *Betkuchi*, etc indicate areas of cultivation of a particular crop. Bay leaves (*tejpat*) were cultivated in the hilly areas.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q2: Write True/False:

(i) Shihabuddin Talish was a Muslim chronicler who accompanied Mir Jumla. (True/False)

(ii) Salt manufacturing was carried out by the people of *Kumar* and the *Hira* communities. (True/False)

(iii) *Tantikuchi*, *Kamarkuchi* are the name of urban centres during the period of Ahom rule. (True/False)

(iv) Sadiya being the central market for the entire hill tribes. (True/False)

(v) *Duaria Baruah* was appointed to collect taxes and control illicit transport of goods. (True/False)

8.5 RELIGION

Brahmanical religion maintained its supremacy in the Assamese society during the medieval period. However, the religion became more complex with elaborate rituals and ceremonies thus losing the favour of the common people. Esoteric forms of worship and *Vamacara* rituals, magic and incantation was practiced. These practices continued long after the expansion of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement.

Tantricism was another form of cult worship that involved sacrifices, both animal and human. It is said that human beings were sacrificed at the altar of Kamakhya, Kesaikhaiti and Jayanteshwari. These sacrifices continued until it was banned by Gaurinath Singha. The ruling families as well as the tribal communities worshipped Siva and Sakti in their various forms which is seen through the various temples and shrines built for Siva and Shakti. Sakti worship was also very much prevalent among the local people.

The literary sources refer that during the time of Sankaradeva, Buddhism was prevalent but it was loosely associated with a degenerated form of Tantricism of the *Vajrayana* faith. Sikh religion is also said to have emerged with the visit of Guru Nanak Dev to Kamrupa, which led to many

The laity or the laymen were called *Sisyas*.

Vaishnavism or the worship of Vishnu was prevalent in the ancient period of Assam. The Pala ruler, Dharmapala became a Vaishnavite as mentioned in the *Pushpabhadra grant*. The Vaishnava cult which existed prior to the coming of Sankaradeva was associated with *Pancharatra* cult. This form of *Pancharatra* Vaishnavism was allied with Tantric rituals.

The Vaishnava cult of Sankardeva is immersed in the teachings of *Gita* and *Bhagavata Purana*, and they served as the source of guidance to its followers. The Neo- Vaishnavism cult encouraged its followers to surrender themselves into the absolute power of the sole Lord Krishna or Vishnu. Sankaradeva had announced that a true Vishnu devotee should visit no other temple but that which was dedicated to Vishnu. They should also not accept any offerings given in temples dedicated to other Gods or deities other than Vishnu. Sankaradeva did not believe in renunciating life or being a celibate for spiritual attainment. He also did not hesitate to initiate women into the faith.

The popularity of the new faith led to a creative upsurge of literary works. Both Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, his disciple and successor were accomplished poets. Sankaradeva along with his cousin Ramaraya established prayer halls known as *Namghars* for religious discussion, mass prayer, occasional performances of dance and drama, etc. The movement suffered a jolt after the death of Sankardeva and also due to the secessionist group led by Damodardeva and Harideva. Vaishnavism had to face many challenges also due to the growing royal patronage to Sakti cult.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3: Fill in the blanks:

(i) Human sacrifices continued until it was banned by the Ahom king _____.

(ii) *Mahapurushiya* dharma was started by_____.

(iii) The Vaishnava cult which existed prior to the coming of Sankaradeva was associated with _____ cult.

Pani Phukan, Deka Phukan, Rajkhowas and *Panidihingias*. There were also the Barua, Hazarika, Saikia and Bora. Besides, there were several other miscellaneous officials like *Katakis* (royal messengers), Kakatis (clerks), *Dolois* (astrologers), *Neog* (both military and civil), etc.

For smooth local administration different categories of governors were appointed by the Ahom Government. Among the governors, the *Sadiya Khowa Gohain*, *Marangi Khowa Gohain* and *Salal Gohain* occupied a distinctive position in the Ahom administration. The governors along with the prime responsibility of looking after the administration of the area under their charge had to look after the defence of the nearby frontiers. In general, the governors enforced law and order, collected revenue and administered justice in their respective areas of jurisdiction. The princes and the close relatives of the ruling monarch were appointed as *Meldagia* or *Melkhowa Rajas* to look after the local administration.

In the matters of administration of justice the king's court was the supreme and the highest court of appeal. In the absence of the king, it was the *Nyaya Sodha Phukan* who exercised jurisdiction. Appeals could be made to the king's court from the Barbarua's and Phukan's court. Next in authority to the king's court was the court of the Barbarua. This court was so powerful that even the three Dangarias were not exempted from its jurisdiction. The minor disputes at the village level were settled locally in the village Namghars, open place or in the house of an influential person in the assembly of villagers. This was known as the *Meldowan*. The decision of such Mel was taken unanimously. If unanimity could not be reached, the decision of the majority prevailed.

We shall now discuss the Paik System.

- **Paik System**

The Paik system was also known as the *Khel System*. Under this system every adult male population of the kingdom between the age group of 16 to 50 was registered as a Paik for rendering service to the state. Besides rendering military service to the state, the Paik also had to provide some service to their masters.

The Paiks were broadly divided into two classes - *Kanri* and *Chamua*.

MILITARY ADMINISTRATION

The Ahoms had an efficient military organization. A unique feature of the Ahom army was that it was drawn from all sections of the people. Under the Paik System, all able bodied men of the Ahom kingdom were bound to render compulsory military service. There were also contingents supplied by the Bhuyans and the other vassal chieftains.

The Barbarua was the Commander-in-chief of Upper Assam and the Barphukan that of Lower Assam. During an emergency, the Gohains, the royal princes and even the king himself led the men in battle. There was a regular system of gradation of officers in the Ahom army.

The full contingent of the Ahom army consisted of infantry, navy, artillery, elephant, cavalry and spies. Technical skill and general excellence of the Assamese infantry was very sound which is even referred to in the Persian chronicles. The strength of infantry was very high. The navy was an important wing of the Ahom army. The naval department was under the supervision of the *Naosaliya Phukan*. The war boats called *Bacharis* were very strong and durable. These were furnished with big guns and cannons with the capacity of carrying 70 to 80 men. For manufacturing the large boats there was a central workshop called *Barnaosal* located initially at Garhgaon and later at Rangpur. Besides, smaller workshops called *Naosals* were there at Garhgaon, Jaipur, Majuli and Dergaon.

Artillery was an important part of Ahom warfare. The Ahom soldiers were experts in making various kinds of guns, match locks, artillery and big cannons. An officer called *Khargharia Phukan* looked after the manufacture of fire arms and gun powder. Elephantry was placed under the charge of *Hati Barua*. Elephants were used to break through forts and palisades as well as in clearing thick jungles so that the infantry could pass through. The cavalry too was placed under the charge of a Barua called *Ghora Barua*. He was required to maintain a registrar of the horses. He classified them according to their breed, age, colour and size.

The Ahoms had a highly developed espionage system. Prior to an expedition spies were sent to the enemy camp to gather information about the strength and war strategy of the rivals. Forts were constructed by the

8.8 FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H.K. (2003)*: The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. II & III 2nd edn, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati.
2) Baruah, S.L.,(1996): *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi.
3) Bhuyan, A.C., (1999): *Political History Assam*, Publication Board Assam, Vol. II & III 2nd edn, Guwahati.

8.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No. 1: (i) *Daivajanas*

(ii) *Katha Gurucharita*.

(iii) Madhava Kandali

(iv) Chaklang

(v) Paiks

(vi) Chamua

Ans to Q No. 2: (i) True

(ii) False

(iii) False

(iv) True

(v) True

Ans to Q No. 3: (i) Gaurinath Singha

(ii) Sankardev

(iii) *Pancharatra*

Ans to Q No. 4: (i) The *Bhakats* were the devotees who held clerical jobs. Celibate devotees were known as *Kewaliya Bhakats*.

(ii) The prayer halls known as *Namghars* were meant for religious discussion, mass prayer, occasional performances of dance and drama, etc.

(iii) Satradhikar

Ans to Q No. 5: (i) False

(ii) True

(iii) True

(iv) False