UNIT 10 : ECONOMY

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will able to-

- understand the rural economy of ancient Assam
- know about the Urban economy of ancient Assam
- trace the industries and different crafts of ancient Assam
- discuss about different trade routes of ancient Assam
- know about the medium of exchange of ancient Assam.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

Economy is considered as the backbone of a country. It is believed that with the beginning of the social life, the economic processes on earth get started and with the passage of time it became more powerful and

dynamic factor for the societies. Geographical location, quantity of natural resources and general habit of the inhabiting people are the three chief factors for shaping the economic life of a country. The water bodies also plays crucial role in forming the economic condition of a region. As Hem Barua called Assam as the land of "Red River and Blue Hills", therefore its two large rivers i.e. Brahmaputra and Barak as well as numerous mountains and hills plays pivotal role in shaping the economy of the state. The inhabiting of diverse ethnic groups in this topographical setting assumes that the economic patterns of this land are also diverse in character.

It is assumed that one of the earliest inhabitants of North-East i.e. the Austro-Asiatic group was the first to introduced cultivation of rice as well as certain fruits and vegetables in this land. Apart from cultivation, the Austric people were also expert in domesticating horse and elephants as well as pottery making. The coming of the Aryans not only changes the vary dynamics of society but also the economy of this land. The introduction of Agrahara system put the whole agricultural sector in a more organized and well ordered shape. They introduced the use of plough in the plains instead of jhuming which was gradually become popular among the masses in the state.



LET US KNOW

The *Agrahara* was basically a system where land grants were gifted by the kings to the Brahmanas for religious and educational purpose. Although the *Agrahara* land was gifted in the name of the deity or temples but that land was managed by the Brahmanas for the benefit of the religious institutions. During the days of the Gupta Empire, *agrahara* grants were restricted only to the Brahmanas which were hereditary and revenue free in character.

10.3 RURAL ECONOMY

Agriculture was the backbone of rural economy in ancient Assam. Therefore, the ownership of land was an important issue in this regard. The

king was the sole owner of the all arable land of the villages. To show his religious tolerance and long life, the kings of ancient Assam often donated lands to the Brahmanas. Apart from donating the land and villages, the kings also donated the villagers to the Brahmanas. Sometime, along with the villagers, extra workers or laborers were also donated to help the Brahmanas. The donee received control over those people after acquiring the donated land from the kings. By issuing the 'Kamauli Copper Grant', king Vaidyadeva donated lands and extra four hundred workers to the Brahmana, Shrutidhara. The total amount of donated land was calculated through the production rate of the paddy. The boundaries of the donated villagers were determined by the big trees, ponds, subways, rivulets, reservoirs etc which were located on the village sides. There were two types of donated lands in ancient Assam- (a) the donated village or villages with its inhabitants, and (b) the donated lands without the inhabitants which were appropriate cultivable lands along with ponds, hursts etc. When the individual donees received land grants from the state he also enjoyed the power of collection land taxes from the donated villages. Therefore, the villagers of the donated land paid their land taxes to the donees instead of the state. After cutting and cleaning the jungles of the donated land, the villagers started cultivation and they get one portion of total production. This type of production system definitely developed the concept of feudal economy in ancient Assam.



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The Division of Land: Various epigraphic sources mention that in ancient period land was divided into three distinct divisions i.e. *janapada* (countryside), *pura* or *nagara* (cities and towns) and *vana* (forest land).

The *janapada* was basically divided into several villages known in ancient times as *grama*. The *grama* was a combination of various land divisions such as *vastu bhumi* or residential area, *kshetra bhumi* or cultivable land, *go*-(*pra*)-*cara bhumi* or land for cattle grazing, *khila bhumi* or waste land etc.

10.3.1 Mode of Cultivation

Although land was considered as an important source of revenue to the State as well as to the donee, however, no definite information regarding the method or procedure of cultivation was found in any ancient sources. It was believed that hired laborers were employed for this purpose. The Narada Purana affirms that among the different kinds of paid servants, the soldiers, agriculturists and porters, the agricultural laborers occupy the second rank in importance. It is further stated that when the pay scale of the hired laborers has not been properly fixed he should get 1/10th of the produce of the soil. The Brihaspati Purana confirms that if a laborer would neglect his basic task, he should not get any payment and may be produced in the court.

It may be assumed that hired labor was employed by the bhusvami or the land owners either on contract basis or on the basis of daily or monthly wages, and in both cases they were probability paid in kind. Both male and female were working as laborers in ancient Assam. The males mostly worked in the firms and women were engaged on household as well as field workers. Women were hired in large numbers at the time of transplanting the paddy seedlings and again when the crops were being reaped. The Raghuvamsha mentions that in Kamrupa region the wives of the peasants watched their crops. Minor agricultural laborers were divided into several professional castes. The Baruis, Boria and the Haloa Kaivartas are mostly agricultural castes. The hill tribes, the Abors and the Daflas were engaged in slave trafficking. These persons carried off into bondage persons captured in their raids on the plains. These captive persons resembled the serfs or slaves and were evidently engaged as agricultural laborers.

Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsung mentioned that for the cultivation of paddy as well as other agricultural products proper irrigation system was introduced in ancient Assam. Like other parts

of India, the Brihaspati Purana mentions that iron plough was also used in ancient Assam. Cosmas however makes the interesting statement that "some people of Assam used thick rhinoceros skin in their plough instead of iron".

10.3.2 Agricultural Products and Fishing

All the people whether they were non-tribal Aryan or tribal habits rice was considered as the staple food of ancient Assam. In Assam rice fall under three main classes- Sali, bao and ahu. Sali is a winter crop growing on low lying areas. Bao is sown mainly on marshy land in deep water, while ahu is a spring crop giving coarse rise. Varahamihir refers that the people of ancient Assam cultivated almost nine different types of rice. It is because Assam being a land of heavy rainfall and furrowed by canals and rivers, therefore the ancient people paid more attention to the cultivation of rice in preference to other kinds of ravi crops.

It was believed that the Austro- Asiatic people were the first to introduce the cultivation of banana, betel, coconut, brinjal, sugarcane etc in ancient Assam. However, except betel the epigraphs of ancient Assam did not properly mention about the extensive use of such cultivation of the people of ancient Assam. The foreign traveler Tavernier refers to the extraction of salt from the banana trees.

In the early epigraphs of Assam, there was hardly any reference about the cultivation of cereals and vegetables. The Nowgong grant of Balavarmana refers to the betel vines and areca palms extensively growing in the country. The Harshacharita mention that the presents sent by Bhaskaravarmana to the court of Kanauj of Harshavardhana included milky betel nut fruits hanging from its sprays. The Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsung speaks of the cultivation of jackfruits in ancient Assam.

Another rural product which was highly favorable for the Assamese people was fishing. Inscription mentions the kaivartas, a

class of people in Assamese society whose main duty was to catch fish in rivers and ponds. Fish is a special food of the Assamese and was believed that this habit might be migrated to other parts of eastern India and hence in the Jatakas and early Indian literature we find practically reference to fish as an item of food.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Which dynasty of ancient India restricted the *agrahara* grants only to the Brahmanas?

Q 2: What was *go*-(*pra*)-*cara bhumi* in ancient Assam?

Q 3: Mention three agricultural castes of ancient Assam.

Q 4: What were the three chief classes or rice that cultivated in ancient Assam?

Q 5: Write briefly in 100 words about the 'division of land' in ancient Assam.

10.4 URBAN ECONOMY-CITIES AND PURAS

The inscriptions of ancient Assam mostly gave their attention towards land grants and village people and provide limited references about the cities and towns as well as the life of the urban people. As compared to the rural life the people of urban areas were more heterodox in nature. Strabo mention that "the village people entirely avoid going into the towns, as they did not like the mode of general life prevalent in the cities and towns, however they often compelled to go there for earning their livelihood".

In ancient Assam, the most prominent cities were Hatappesvara, Durjaya, Kamrupanagara and Pragjyotishapura. Hatappesvara developed centering round a temple called Hatakasulin which attracted pilgrims, ultimately giving rise to shops, rest houses and other amenities. The city was situated on the bank of the river Lauhitya, full of boats, evidently used for the purpose of trade.

The Hevajra Tantra of the seventh century mentioned that Kamrupanagara was originally a secular capital city which ultimately became one of the sacred four earliest pithas. The Nowgong Grant of Balavarmana

gives a graphic description of Pragjyotishapura where areca nut and betel-vines were surrounded and hati or elephants danced to the tune of peacocks in the upavana. Some scholars mention that due to the abundance of gua or betel vines, the city ultimately known as Gua- hat. The Nowgong Grant further inform us that Pragjyotishpura had rows of palaces which contained many rooms with different types of pictures in them. This information throws light about the development of paintings in Pragjyotishanagara.

The Tezpur Grant pointing to the existence of broad highways through which articles of trade were often brought into the big cities. This naturally helped in the establishment of different types of shops where jewellery works and articles of gold were exhibited attracting the notice of the people.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Name some cities that developed in ancient Assam.

Q 7: Which city of ancient Assam was developed centering round the Hatakasulin temple?

10.5 INDUSTRIES AND CRAFTS

The craftsmen of ancient Assam had a great reputation in ancient India. The wealth of ancient Assam actually played a pivotal role in the evolution of industries and crafts in ancient Assam. The literary, epigraphic and foreign account sources showed evidence about the existence of different professional classes like weavers, spinners, smiths, workers of ivory, metal, wood etc and their reputation was equal to that of other parts of India.

10.5.1 Metal, metal objects and jewellery

It is beyond any doubt that Gold was one of the rarest products of ancient India. The Periplus of the Erithreyan Sea makes some significant statement about Caltis coins which K.L. Baruah

relates it to the country of the Kalitas in the Brahmaputra valley. The Tezpur Grant of Vanamalavarmana informs us that Lauhitya- Sindhu river carrying gold dust from the huge golden blocs of the Kailasa Mountain. The tula purusha dana ceremony of king Jayapala where he gifted 900 gold coins to a learned Brahmana as referred in the Silimpur grant indicates that gold making was an important industry in ancient Assam. Regarding silver, we find some information of silver productions in the Goalpara district. However, we do not have any explicit information about the existence of iron in the epigraphic records. Bargaon Grant of Ratnapala mention about the use of copper in ancient Assam. The discovering of copper plates indicates the existence of copper in ancient Assam. The inscription of Ratnapala also mentions about the existence of copper mines in his kingdom which help him to get considerable income.

Borgaon Grant also mention about shops of merchants where jewellery objects were sold. The references of "Kalika Purana" indicate that there were persons proficient in the art of making silver and gold ornaments who also knew the method of setting jewels on them.



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Tula- Purusha- Dana: This is a practice or rituals of the royal families of ancient Assam where the king was weighed against a commodity primarily gold coins and equivalent weight of that gold coins were offered as donations to the citizens of his kingdom.

10.5.2 Wooden works, Aromatics

The items presented in the court of Harshavardhana by the King Bhaskaravarmana which was mentioned in the Harshacharita, display the existence of skillful craftsmen in ancient Assam. In the Tezpur Grant of Vanamalavarmana, we find references to boats

carved with designs and decorated with ornaments. Bamboo is an important product of Assam in ancient times. "Harshacharita" inform us that King Bhaskara sent mango juice to Harshavardhana in a bamboo tubes. The forests of Assam also supplied resins, aromatic woods etc to the rest of India and abroad. In the list of presents sent by Bhaskaravarman to Harshavardhana, we find mention of Go-sirsha sandal, which according to the Divyavandana was a very costly product. In the NowgongGrant of Balavarmana also refers to musk produced by the deer of Assam.

10.5.3 Manufacture of silk, lac and minor crafts

The evidence of the Periplus of the Erythrian Sea highlights that silk was imported into Assam from China. However, there was also an indigenous variety of silk in Assam. Assam was the home of two best qualities of silk- dukula and patrona. The Bargaon grant of Ratnapala informs us that dukula cloths were used in making flags. From the time of Bhaskaravarmana, Assam also produced kshauma. Banabhatta in his "Harshacharita" indicates that King Bhaskara sent Ksaumani i.e. kshauma cloths to Harsha. Different varieties of silk especially associated with Assam are known as pat, edi and muga.

Lac culture was a specialty of the ancient Assamese people. The Pushpabhadra Grant of Dharmapala refers to the trunk of the madhurasvattha tree which was used for breeding la-poka or lac-insect.

The archaeological remains show the production of bricks in Assam. The Sualkuchi grant of Ratnapala gives ample information about the art of brick making. The Nidhanpur Grant mentions about pit from where the pottery makers used to gather their materials for wheels. There are few references to leather works too. In the list of the presents to Harshavardhana by Bhaskaravarmana mentions of leather and leather bucklers were also found.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8. Which inscription refers that gold making was an important industry in ancient Assam?

Q 9. Mention the name of the best qualities silk cloths of ancient Assam.

Q 10. The art of brick making is mentioned in the ———————— .

10.6 TRADE ROUTES

The reference of maha -rajamarga in the Tezpur grant, vithi and catushpatha in the Pushpabhadra grant pointing out the existence of broad highways which were connected with the cities of ancient Assam for the purpose of trade. From the Vanaparvan of Mahabharata we find mention of trade route between Assam and the West of India. From the Bhaskaravarmana presents to Harshavardhana's court we can assume that there was also a route connecting Nalanda and Ganzam with ancient Assam. China was connected with Assam through the different tracts of the eastern hills and also connected with south-west Asia through land or sea routes.

10.7 MEDIUM OF EXCHANGE

Due to the dearth of coins in ancient Assam, it is difficult to determine the exact nature of the revenue of the state. However, barter system was followed for internal affairs. "Harshacharita" of Banabhatta indicates about the use of cowries in the days of Bhaskaravarman. The Tezpur Rock inscriptions of Harjarvarmana further proved it that the people of ancient Assam used cowries as medium of exchange in their kingdom. In case of trade with foreign countries like China and Suvarnabhumi, metal probably gold coins cultis were used. The Silimpur grants of Jayapala mention that the king offered gold coins to the Brahmanas instead of land.



10.8 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit you have learnt that-

- The Austro-Asiatic people were the first to start cultivation of rice in north-east India. They basically followed the jhumimg process in cultivation. However, the coming of the Aryans changed the former cultivation process and introduced the use of plough in paddy fields. The agrahara settlement also helped in changing the mode of production in ancient Assam.
- The division of land and the ownership of cultivation land helped the rural economy of the state and increased the production of cultivable products of ancient Assam.
- The cities and 'puras' not only reflects the urban life of ancient Assam but also light on the development of urban economy of the state.
- The various industries and craft production centers also helped in the growth and development of the economy of ancient Assam.
- The trade routes actually connects the trade centers both internally and externally which not only expand the trade in Assam but also shaped the international trade of ancient Assam with South East Asia.



10.9 FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H.K. (ed), (2004). The Comprehensive History of Assam.Vol-I, Guwahati, Publication Board of Assam.
2) Baruah, S.L. (2003). A Comprehensive History of Assam. New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
3) Gait, C.J. (2001). A History of Assam. Guwahati, Bina Library.
4) Choudhury, P.C. (1959). The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century AD. Gauhati, DHAS, Assam.
5) Barua, B.K. (1951). A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period) Vol-I, Madras, C.S. Press.

10.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: The Gupta dynasty.

Ans to Q No 2: In ancient Assam the cattle grazing land of the villages were known as go-(pra)- cara bhumi.

Ans to Q No 3: The Baruis, Boria and the Haloa Kaivartas.

Ans to Q No 4: Sali, bao and ahu rice.

Ans to Q No 5: Like the rest of India, in ancient Assam too, land was considered as the chief pillar of the economic life of the state. Various epigraphic sources mention that in ancient period land was divided into three distinct divisions i.e. janapada (countryside), pura or nagara (cities and towns) and vana (forest land). Apart from economic, the people of pura or nagara comparatively played important role in politics. Therefore from economic point of view janapadas and vanas contributed more in ancient time.

The janapada was basically divided into several villages known in ancient times as grama. The grama was a combination of various land divisions such as vastu bhumi or residential area, kshetra bhumi or cultivable land, go-(pra)-cara bhumi or land for cattle grazing, khila bhumi or waste land etc.

Ans to Q No 6: Hatappesvara, Durjaya, Kamrupanagara and Pragjyotishapura.

Ans to Q No 7: Hatappesvara.

Ans to Q No 8: Silimpur grant of King Jayapala.

Ans to Q No 9: dukula, patrona and kshauma.

Ans to Q No 10: Sualkuchi grant of Ratnapala.



10.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

(A) Very Short Questions (Answer each question in about 50 words):

Q 1. What was Khila Bhumi in ancient Assam?

Q 2. Mention the name of the vegetables that were cultivated by Austro-Asiatic groups in ancient Assam?

Q 3. Where the Hatakasulin temple was located?

Q 4. What do you mean by the term 'Kshauma'?

Q 5. What the word 'vithi' mean?

(B) Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words):

Q 1. Write a short note on Agrahara system of ancient Assam.

Q 2. Briefly describe about the 'tual-purusha-dana' system.

Q 3. Write a brief note about the cloth industry of ancient Assam.

(C) Long Questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words):

Q 1. Analyze the industrial growth of ancient Assam.

Q 2. Discuss the nature of the economy of ancient Assam with reference to the existing sources of information.

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