UNIT 8: LAND REVENUE SYSTEM, AGRICULTURE AND TRADE IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Dear learner, after going through this unit, you will be able to:

1. Understand the structure and functioning of the land revenue systems under the Ahom and Koch kingdoms, including the Paik and Jotedari systems.
2. Explain the classification of land, agricultural practices, and the role of taxation and labour in the medieval Assamese economy.
3. Analyze the interrelationship between agriculture, trade, crafts, and social institutions such as slavery and serfdom in shaping medieval Assamese society.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit offers a detailed study of the land revenue and agrarian systems of medieval Assam, with particular emphasis on the administrative and economic structures of the Ahom and Koch kingdoms. It explains how land was owned, classified, and managed by the state, and how revenue was collected through different institutional arrangements. A major focus is placed on the Ahom Paik System, which was based on compulsory labour service, as well as the Jotedari system of the Koch kingdom, which was primarily based on rent-paying cultivators. It alsodiscusses the classification of land according to fertility and use, the role of surveys and records in revenue administration, and the functioning of special taxes and exemptions. Alongside this, it highlights the importance of agriculture as the backbone of the medieval Assamese economy, describing cultivation practices, crops, tools, and irrigation methods adapted to the riverine environment of the Brahmaputra valley.

In addition, the unit explores craft production, internal and external trade networks, the role of markets (hats), and the contribution of artisans to the economy. It also examines labour systems such as slavery and serfdom, and the social hierarchy associated with land and production. Overall, the unit helps learners understand the close relationship between economy, society, and political authority in medieval Assam, and how these systems shaped the historical development of the region.

8.3 LAND REVENUE SYSTEM UNDER THE AHOMS

During the early years of the Ahom kingdom, there was no separate revenue department. The kingdom was small, and administrative as well as revenue functions were managed by the chief ministers known as the Borgohain and Burhagohain. As the kingdom expanded Barpatra Gohain was appointed during the reign of Dihingia Raja. The most significant development was the establishment of the offices of the Barbarua and the Barphukan during the reign of Pratap Singha (1603–1641). These officials supervised administration, revenue collection, judicial affairs, and military matters in different regions of the kingdom. To improve revenue management, the Ahom rulers introduced systematic land surveys and population censuses, and employed professional surveyors known as Kakatis who were brought from Bengal. These surveys recorded landholdings, classified land, estimated population, and prepared revenue records known as peda-kakats which served as records of rights and landholding. One of the most distinctive features of the Ahom system was the theory of state ownership of land. The Ahom kings considered: "All land and all subjects belonged to the State." Although the state claimed ownership, peasants enjoyed secure possession of their lands as long as they fulfilled their obligations. For effective administration, land was carefully classified according to its use and fertility. One was Bari or Veti Land which was homestead land used for houses, gardens, tanks, etc. The other was pasture land used for grazing. Land was also categorized on the basis of nature and fertility of soil which included: Rupit (wet rice land) which was suitable for transplanting rice, Faringati which was suitable for dry crops, Kathiyatali- nursery land for rice seedlings, Sariahtali- land used for mustard cultivation, Baotoli- low lying land suitable for spring paddy, Jalatak- waterlogged land, Dalani- marshy grassland, beel-fisheries, Bakari-open pasture land, Habi- forest land, Ubar land- waste or surplus land. The foundation of Ahom revenue administration was the Paik System. In this system, revenue was realized through compulsory labour service. Paiks received land and had to serve the state in return. Thus, land revenue was paid through labour rather than agricultural produce.

- **The Paik System**

The Paik System was the foundation of the military, administrative, and economic organization of the Ahom Kingdom. This system was based on mobilization of adult male labour and military service. Every able-bodied male between approximately fifteen and fifty years of age was registered as a Paik and was liable to render service to the state. Until the sixteenth century, the Ahoms conducted no systematic land survey; instead, the state maintained periodic censuses of adult males, known as paiks, who formed the backbone of the kingdom’s administration and defence. Except for the king, nobles, priests, high-caste individuals, and persons engaged in specialized occupations, all adult males were liable to serve the state in

both civil and military capacities. Thus, the paik system provided the Ahom kingdom with a vast pool of labourers, cultivators, artisans, and soldiers. Under this system, every able-bodied adult male was enrolled in a hierarchical organization. The origins of the system can be traced to the arrival of Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom, who organized his followers into occupational groups or Khels. However, the system attained its mature form during the reign of Pratap Singha (1603–1641) under the reforms of Momai Tamuli Barbarua. To strengthen the administration and reduce local loyalties, he reorganized the population into a systematic structure based on occupations and services. This helped integrate diverse ethnic and tribal groups into a unified state.

- **Khels**

The paiks were grouped into large divisions called mel or dagi, which were further divided into **khels**, and then into smaller units known as gots, usually consisting of three or four men. The got was the basic unit of the Paik system. At any given time, one member of the got was required to serve the state, while the remaining members cultivated his land and supported his family. During emergencies such as war, additional members could be called into service. Paiks performed a variety of duties, including military service, construction of roads, embankments, public buildings, and work on royal farms. The paiks served different authorities within the kingdom. Some divisions were attached to the three great ministers (Gohains), others served members of the royal family under officials such as Phukans, Baruas, and Rajkhowas, while the largest divisions worked directly for the king and the state. Officers commanding units of twenty (Bora), one hundred (Saikia), and one thousand (Hazarika) paiks formed an important administrative hierarchy. These officers, along with high-ranking nobles, enjoyed privileges such as office lands and the services of a portion of the paiks under their command. The Paik system retained strong tribal and communal characteristics. Early khels were organized on the basis of kinship groups, clans, or local communities and were often associated with specific localities. Although later administrative changes scattered these groups across the kingdom, the basic structure continued to reflect its tribal origins.

The paiks were broadly divided into two categories: Kanri (ordinary) paiks and Chamua paiks. The Kanri paiks formed the majority and performed military duties, agricultural work, and public services. During wartime they served as soldiers, particularly archers, while in peacetime they worked as cultivators and labourers. The Chamuas were a privileged group consisting of skilled artisans, officials, and specialists who were generally exempt from manual labour and military service. Through merit and efficient service, a Chamua could rise to high administrative positions such as Barbarua or Barphukan. The Paiks were grouped into occupational divisions known as Khels. The Khel system organized the adult population into specialized service groups responsible for various roles such as Naosaliya Khel (Boat building), Dhenuchocha Khel (Arrow-making), etc.

- **Special Taxes**

The Ahom administration imposed certain special taxes depending on local conditions and occupational requirements. In flood-prone or newly settled areas, cultivators who were not integrated into the regular Paik system paid a tax known as

Plough Tax. This tax was generally levied on agricultural operations and served as a substitute for labour obligations. Certain hill tribes engaged in cotton cultivation through shifting agriculture were required to pay a Hoe Tax. Since these communities followed different patterns of cultivation and could not easily be incorporated into the regular Paik structure, the state adapted its revenue demands according to local circumstances.

The aristocracy and high-ranking officials enjoyed special privileges in matters of landholding. Members of the noble class often possessed lands considerably larger than those allotted to ordinary Paiks. Although they were exempt from many forms of labour service, they paid a tax known as Gadhan, which functioned as a substitute for military obligations.

A particularly important category of land was known as Ubarmati. These were lands that were neither held by ordinary Paiks nor assigned to nobles. Ubarmati lands remained under the direct control of the king and were considered royal property. One of the most significant aspects of Ahom land administration was the grant of revenue-free lands, collectively known as Lakhiraj Lands. The Ahom kings granted lands to temples, religious institutions and pious and meritorious persons. These lands were originally known as the half-revenue paying estates but in course of time these were held revenue-free, and the owners called themselves Lakhirajdars, denoting total exemption from payment of revenue. There was also land given to the Brahmins by the king known as the Bamunbhalmanuhiajama. The Lakhiraj lands were classified under several heads like- Dabattar lands granted for the maintenance of temples, Brahmattar lands for that of the Brahmins, Dharmattar lands donated for that of religious and charitable purposes, such as for reading the Bhagavat, performing the Nama-kirtan (religious music and recital) and supplying food to the pilgrims, and Nankar lands granted to the Shudras of religious order.

8.4 LAND REVENUE SYSTEM UNDER THE KOCHES

The land revenue system of the Koch kingdom was one of the most important pillars of its administration and economy. Unlike the Ahom kingdom, where state revenue was largely based on the Paik labour system, the Koch state depended primarily on land revenue collected from cultivators. Agriculture formed the backbone of the economy, and land was the principal source of state income. The revenue system was organized around the Jotedariinstitution, a hierarchy of tenures, and a network of officials responsible for assessment and collection of revenue.

The Koch state broadly classified land into revenue-paying lands and rent-free lands. Revenue-paying lands formed the principal source of state income, while rent-free lands were granted for religious, charitable, administrative, and maintenance purposes. The rent-free category included Debutter (Devottar) lands granted to temples, Brahmottar lands granted to Brahmins, Lakhiraj lands exempted from revenue, Petbhata lands assigned for maintenance allowances, and Jaigir lands granted in return for services rendered to the state.

Revenue-paying lands were further divided into different categories. The most important among them was Mal land, which constituted the principal source of state revenue. Another category was Khangi land, reserved for meeting the personal and

household expenses of the Maharaja. Although Khangi lands were initially maintained separately, they were later merged with the Mal lands. Through these categories, the state ensured a steady flow of revenue to both the royal treasury and the royal household.

The Jotedari System

The most distinctive feature of Koch land administration was the Jotedari System. The persons who paid revenue directly to the state were known as Jotedars. They occupied the highest position among cultivators and acted as the principal revenue-paying tenants. Initially, Jotedars were actual cultivators and resident landholders, but over time they became intermediaries between the state and subordinate tenants. The Jotedari system gradually became the backbone of the Koch agrarian economy and revenue administration.

Components of Revenue

The revenue demand under the Koch system consisted of two principal elements: Assal and Abooab. Assal represented the original or basic rent assessed on land, while Abooab referred to additional cesses, taxes, and miscellaneous charges imposed over and above the basic assessment. In later years, these two components were consolidated into a single revenue demand. This system often increased the burden on cultivators, particularly when additional cesses accumulated over time. One of the notable features of the Koch revenue system was the practice of annual settlement. Revenue assessments were generally made every year, and there was no permanent settlement during the early period. Land was usually not measured scientifically, and assessments were often based on previous demands rather than actual productivity. However, cultivators could submit complaints against excessive assessments, and the authorities occasionally granted remissions. The collection of revenue was entrusted to government officials known as Sajwals. These officials assessed and collected rents from cultivators and transmitted the revenue to the state treasury. Besides official taxes, cultivators had to bear additional charges known as **Maffasil Khurcha**, which included expenses such as **Nuzzar or Selami** (customary gifts to officials), interest on loans taken to pay rent arrears, and **Talabana** (allowances paid to peons). These extra charges often imposed a significant burden on the peasantry. Over time, the Koch agrarian system witnessed the development of a complicated hierarchy of subordinate tenures beneath the Jotedars. These included **Chukani**, **Dar-Chukani**, **Dara-Dar-Chukani**, **Tashya-Chukani**, **Tali-Chukani**, and **Tashya-Tali-Chukani** tenures. This process of sub-infeudation created multiple layers of intermediaries between the state and the actual cultivator. Holders of these tenures enjoyed occupancy rights and could generally inherit, divide, transfer, or sell their holdings.

Another important feature of the Koch land system was the Bhagiyari Tenure, which represented a co-sharer form of landholding. It existed in two forms: Suddar Bhagiyari, which was an independent shareholding tenure, and Tali or Koljani Bhagiyari, which functioned as a dependent tenure. Bhagiyari tenures reflected the communal and cooperative traditions of landholding that survived within the Koch agrarian structure.

The Koch revenue system underwent significant reforms during the period of British influence. Administrative inefficiency, corruption, and arbitrary assessments had weakened the system. To address these issues, officials such as Mr. Ahmuty introduced reforms that included the measurement of land, the issue of Pattas (title deeds) to cultivators, and the encouragement of cultivation on waste lands. These reforms helped increase agricultural production and improved revenue collection. Land revenue remained the principal source of income for the Koch state. Revenue collected from Mal lands, rents paid by Jotedars, and additional cesses supported the royal administration, military establishment, and public institutions. The revenue system thus formed the economic foundation of the Koch kingdom and enabled the state to maintain political authority and administrative efficiency.

8.5 AGRICULTURE; CRAFTS AND TRADE

Agriculture was the backbone of the economy and society of medieval Assam. People from all sections of society- from peasants to members of the royal family were engaged in agricultural activities. Even artisans and craftsmen primarily depended on cultivation for their livelihood. Rice was the staple food of the people, and therefore paddy cultivation received greater attention than any other cereal. The fertile alluvial plains of the Brahmaputra valley, abundant rainfall, numerous rivers and streams, and rich foothill regions created ideal conditions for agriculture. Three main varieties of paddy were cultivated: ahu (dry rice), bao (deep-water rice), and sali (transplanted wet rice). Among these, sali rice was the principal crop and occupied the largest area under cultivation. Agriculture in Assam adapted to the region's varied geography. Wet-rice cultivation dominated the plains, while jhum or shifting cultivation was widely practised in the hills by tribal communities.

The arrival of the Ahoms in the thirteenth century brought a major transformation in Assamese agriculture. The Ahoms possessed advanced knowledge of wet-rice (sali) cultivation, which involved the transplantation of rice seedlings in permanent irrigated fields. This method was far more productive and efficient than the shifting or slash-and-burn cultivation (jhum) practised by many tribal communities. Shifting cultivation required large areas of land because fields had to be left fallow for several years after a few harvests, whereas wet-rice cultivation could sustain continuous production on the same land. Despite the spread of settled agriculture, medieval Assam displayed a mixed agricultural system in which settled and shifting cultivation coexisted side by side. The Ahoms also used efficient iron implements, and the extensive use of buffalo power for ploughing marshy lands. The main agricultural implements were the plough, hoe (kodal), harrow (moi), and sickle (kanchi). The plough consisted of crooked piece of hard wood fitted with a small iron share (plal) for penetrating into the soil while the indigenous plough was light and simple. Bullocks and buffaloes were used for ploughing, with buffaloes preferred in low-lying areas. Manuring remained undeveloped under the prevailing ecological condi tion. In fact low, marshy and flooded rice fields required little manure as the running water carried in it organic substance capable of improving the soil. Cow-dung was used mainly for raising vegetable and fruits in orchards and family compounds. The hill tribes, who did not domesticate cows and buffaloes as in the plains, generally did manuring by jhuming in hill areas where the upper thin layer quickly lost its fertility. They also constructed

embankments (mathauris) to control floods and reclaim low-lying marshy areas for cultivation. As a result, large tracts of Upper Assam were converted into productive agricultural land, leading to the growth of prosperous villages across the Brahmaputra valley. The Assamese raised three varieties of paddy: ahu, bao and sali corresponding to the season and the nature of the soil. Ahu rice was the earliest crop, sown between February and April and harvested by June or July. Bao rice was cultivated in waterlogged fields and grew with the rising floodwaters. It was the sali that was the principal crop in Assam. Hamilton refers that this variety formed three-fourths of the whole crops. The seedlings were raised in seedbeds (kathyaitall) and after maturity saplings were removed and transplanted in prepared fields from July to September in land, commonly known as rupit or rowati mati. Sali cultivation required considerable labour, and villagers often helped one another collectively during transplantation and harvesting. Sub-varieties of sali included bar (big) sali, saru (small) sali, kala (black), sali and ahum sali (brought by the Ahoms). The fragrant joha rice, and the glutinous bora rice were also sown.

Apart from rice, a wide variety of crops were cultivated. Mustard seed was produced in great abundance and was exported to Bengal. Sesame was also widely grown for domestic consumption. Various pulses such as mati mah (green gram), mug (common bean), masur (lentil), kola (grass pea), and barkola mah (field pea) were cultivated, while spices including jaluk (black pepper), marich (chilli), ada (ginger), naharu (garlic), onion, turmeric, and bay leaf (tejpat) were common agricultural products. Medieval Assam also produced a rich variety of vegetables and root crops, including brinjal, ranga alu (sweet potato), kath alu (Asiatic yam), arum, lao (gourds), komora (melons), and cucumbers. Pineapple, papaya, guava, pomegranate, jackfruit, oranges**,** and various citrus fruits were widely grown. Sugarcane flourished throughout the region and was mainly used for producing molasses (gur), while sugar manufacturing remained unknown. The cultivation of areca nut (tamul) and betel leaf (pan) occupied an important place in Assamese society and culture. These were consumed daily by people of all classes and were produced in large quantities. Tobacco became an important cash crop by the seventeenth century, while opium (kani) was cultivated and consumed extensively by the early nineteenth century.

Other economically important crops included bamboo, indigo, lac, and gum-producing plants. Bamboo was indispensable in everyday life and was used for housing, furniture, agricultural implements, fishing equipment, and household articles. Lac, extensively cultivated in the hill regions, emerged as an important export commodity to Bengal.

Overall, agriculture in medieval Assam was closely adapted to its natural environment. Frequent floods replenished soil fertility, droughts were rare, and famines were almost unknown. Agricultural production was primarily aimed at local consumption rather than commercial markets, although a few commodities formed important export items

Craft and Trade

Craft production and trade formed an important part of the medieval Assamese economy, although commerce remained relatively limited due to geographical constraints and the absence of a powerful merchant class. During the seventeenth

century influence of Mughal India is seen in the introduction of crafts as tailoring, brass metal casting and manufacture of perfume from roses. In Lower Assam, however, the Vaishya-Saud (Sunri) community, comparable to Bengal's Saha caste, was traditionally engaged in trade. Besides professional traders, skilled artisans such as silk weavers, bell-metal workers, and Kalita craftsmen also marketed their products across the region, often acting as itinerant traders.

The Buranjis refer to the promotion of internal trade by the Ahom monarchs by setting up hats or markets at convenient locations. Rulers like Dihingia Raja, Suklenmung, Pratap Singha and others set up markets to encourage trade with the Nagas. With increase in population more and more internal markets developed as a matter of course to meet the requirements of the people. Their nomenclature seems to throw interesting light on the special need for certain articles, places or the peoples among whom the markets developed. Thus, we have Tamulihat (market for areca-nut), Sariyahat (market for mustard seed) while Moranhat, Nagahat, Kacharihat, Darangihat, Sonpurahat, Dihinghat etc. perhaps indicated markets for the convenience of the people concerned of the particular places. Surplus produce which werebrought to the market consisted by and large betel-leaf, areca-nut, lime, black pepper, mustard seed, ginger, earthen-ware, iron-ware and live-stock: cattle, buffaloes, goats, ducks etc. Transactions were usually made by barter of commodities or through the medium of cowries.15 In 1833, a seer of salt was bartered for nine seers of wax or 15 seers of mustard. Internal markets were subject to market regulations and official super vision governing sales-tax; prices of articles etc. Market tolls (hatkar) were collected by Hātkhowās at a percentage of the price of good as fixed by the king which of course varied from time to time. To collect duties and to control illicit transport of goods Chaukies or Chokies were established at strategic positions. The Bhutias used to come by the valley of the Manas River via Tasgong and Dewangiri to Hajo where a fair was usually held. Assam-Bhutan trade was controlled by an officer Uzir Barua at Simaliyabari (Simalabari) a day's journey from the royal palace of Mangaldoi. No duties were levied by the Baruas, but none could carry on any transaction without engaging the Barua as a broker. The Bhutias exchanged lac, woollens, yak-tails, gold-dust, salt, horses and Chinese silk for Assam muga, silk, cotton clothes and dried-fish, and this trade worth about 2 lakhs at the close of the nineteenth century. In the Southern Hills, trade was carried out with the Garos, Khasis and Jaintias. The Garos bartered in the plains cotton, ivory and iron. In the cast the Jayantias at Ranihat and Sonapur and the Khasis at Jayantiapur exchanged honey, betel-leaf, oranges, iron, cotton and ivory for salt, rice, tobacco and eri-muga cloths. On further cast the Nayas were 'keen barterers'. They carried on extensive trade in cotton at Golaghal, Nagora and Kacharihat. Periodically they came down through certain duars or passes and exchanged at frontier marts their hills products: ginger, chillies betel-leaf, cotton and carried up rice, muga-eri fabrics, iron, dão and dried fish. The Mishmis brought down to the mart at Sadiya* swords, spears, ivory, musks, gathcon (a perfume) and Mishmi-tita (copis-tita) which they exchanged for glass-beads, cloths of various kinds, salt and cattle.

External Trade

Despite the Ahom rulers generally following a closed-door policy for external trade, certain luxury goods like gold, ivory, elephant tusks, and musk attracted the interest of neighbouring regions, especially Bengal. Early rulers like Pratap Singha

strongly restricted foreign contact, even rejecting peace and trade proposals from Bengal and punishing local merchants involved in negotiations. Similarly, in 1641, the Ahom officials refused a Mughal proposal for a formal trade agreement, insisting that unlicensed foreign trade was illegal in Assam. However, after the final expulsion of the Mughals in 1682 and the easing of military tensions, the Ahom attitude gradually changed, leading to the revival of commercial relations with Bengal. Assamese merchants exported goods such as ivory, musk, silk, agarwood, pepper, and yak tails, while importing items like garments, salt, spices, and chemicals including saltpetre and sulphur. The establishment of the Assam (Hadira) Chokey in 1669 further facilitated this trade, leading to the growth of trading centres like Goalpara and Bangālhat where merchants from both regions settled. This process was further strengthened under the rule of Rudra Singha, who actively encouraged trade and abandoned the traditional policy of isolation. The external trade of Ahom Assam was relatively limited in both volume and variety. According to Hamilton, the largest import item was foreign salt, which alone accounted for the major share of expenditure, while the rest was spent on luxury goods and supplies for a small number of foreign residents in Upper Assam. The impetus of external trade increased in the 19th century under the British rule in Assam.

8.6 ZAMINDARI SYSTEM; ARTISANS AND SLAVES

The Ahom administrative and revenue system was not fully implemented in undivided Goalpara because the region had a very different political history from Upper Assam. Goalpara remained largely outside direct Ahom control and was instead influenced successively by the Koch kingdom, the Mughal Empire, and later the British.

Before Mughal expansion, much of Goalpara formed part of the Koch kingdom founded by Viswa Singha and consolidated under Nara Narayan. The Koch rulers followed a land-based revenuesystem, unlike the Ahom Paik system. Revenue was collected from cultivators and local chiefs, and land grants such as Brahmottar, Devottar, Lakheraj and Jaigir were common. After the Mughal conquest of Kamrup and western Assam in the seventeenth century, Goalpara was incorporated into the Mughal administrative framework.

Under Mughal administration, Zamindars functioned primarily as revenue collectors. They were responsible for collecting land revenue from cultivators (ryots) and transmitting it to the state. Although Zamindars exercised considerable local influence, the cultivators retained customary rights over the land they cultivated. The Mughal state generally avoided dispossessing peasants from their lands, recognizing that agricultural productivity depended upon maintaining a stable cultivating population. Even when peasants failed to pay revenue, their agricultural land was usually not confiscated. Instead, tax relief, agricultural loans (*Takavi*), and other measures were sometimes provided to sustain cultivation.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Fill in the blanks:

Q1: The offices of the Barbarua and the Barphukan were established during the reign of _____.

Q2: The Paik system was primarily based on compulsory _____ service.

Q3: The Ahom kings believed that all land and all subjects belonged to the _____.

Q4: _____ became a famous centre for silk weaving in medieval Assam.

Q5: The Paik System under the Ahoms was mainly based on
a. Cash Taxation
b. Labour and Military Service
c. Land Rent System
d. Trade Monopoly

Q6: Which of the following was a major centre of bell-metal casting in medieval Assam?
a. Sualkuchi
b. Sarthebari
c. Ramdia
d. Barpeta

Q7: Under the Ahom system, “Ubarmati” lands referred to
a. Revenue-Free Temple Lands
b. Royal Lands Under Direct Control of the King
c. Land Given to Paiks for Service
d. Grazing Lands for Cattle

Q8: What was the basic unit of the Paik system?

Q9: What is the Assamese term for wet rice land used for transplanting?

Q10: What is the term for revenue-free lands granted to temples and religious institutions under the Ahoms?

- **Artisans and Slaves**

During the medieval period, artisan castes and occupational groups gained increasing importance, following a pattern similar to that of North India. The growth of specialized crafts led to the emergence of important production centres in different parts of Assam. Sualkuchi became renowned for silk weaving, Ramdia developed as a centre for oil-crushing,and Sarthebari emerged as a major hub of bell-metal casting. Under the Ahoms, the chief of the khels of artisans and craftsmen was the Khanikar Barua. Muslim artisans and craftsman were incorporated in the Khanikar Khel or the guild of artisans under Khanikar Barua. The Garakhiya daul at Nazira, Sivasagar is believed to have similarity with Islamic monuments and therefore indicates it was done by artisans experienced in Islamic architecture. These centres produced goods that were widely used and traded within and beyond Assam. Ahom and Koch rulers occasionally imported artisans and craftsmen from Bengal and other areas to introduce innovation in skill and improvement in production of existing crafts and to start new

ones. These artisans introduced new techniques and strengthened local industries. A large number of artisans had also been carried away as slaves by the Burmese by 1826.

The origins of slavery can be traced to the early land grant system, where kings donated not only land but also villages and groups of people to Brahmins, temples, monasteries, nobles, and officials. There is mention of outflow of slaves from Assam to Bengal in order to meet the demand for salt. We get evidence of slavery from King Ramkhamhaeng's stone pillar inscription (1292 A.D.) which states:

If a common man, a noble or a chief fell sick and died, the home of his ancestors, his clothings, his elephants, his family, his rice granaries, his slaves, the areca palm plantations of his ancestors were all transmitted to his children.

It is also mentioned that marriage dowry of a Barphukan's daughter comprised of one hundred slaves along with many other goods. In a sparsely populated region like Assam, cultivable land alone was of little value without labour. Therefore, along with land grants, the rulers transferred their rights over certain inhabitants, who were expected to cultivate the land and provide services to the grantees. The practice of donating a number of specified persons, along with a piece of land, suggests that there was a class of farm people with a more servile status. They were probably slaves or were, at the least, bound to the soil. During the Ahom period, these dependent labourers were known as bahatia (serf), while actual slaves were referred to as dasa, golam, or collectively bandi-beti (male and female domestic slaves). Many of these individuals were settled on agricultural estates and were bound to serve their masters. Slaves and serfs constituted a separate servile class, distinct from the free peasantry and the paik population. Unlike ordinary paiks, who owed labour service to the state and enjoyed rights over allotted land, slaves were personally dependent on kings, nobles, religious institutions, and landlords. The Ahom ruling class—including the king, nobles (*gohain*), religious authorities (*prabhu*), and hereditary chiefs—maintained large farms cultivated by slaves and serfs. Through royal grants, the Ahom Kings often donated lands together with paik households, servants, and slaves. Such grants created hereditary estates where the recipients could enjoy the services of the donated population. Although these people were not always saleable like private property, they were frequently bound to the soil and obliged to work for the grantee. This system resembled serfdom, where labourers were attached to specific estates and could not freely leave them. Slavery and servitude also existed within households. Wealthier peasant families and landlords often possessed a few slaves or bondsmen who assisted in cultivation and domestic work. The ownership of slaves was recognized as a form of inheritable property, alongside houses, livestock, granaries, and gardens.

At the lowest level of the Ahom social hierarchy were the bahatia (serfs) and bandi-beti (male and female slaves). Slightly above them, but still belonging to the servile class, were people permanently attached to religious institutions. Those serving Satras (Vaishnavite monasteries) were known as bhakats, while those attached to temples were called dewalias or temple paiks. Temple paiks were usually granted one and a half to two puras of land for their maintenance. Unlike ordinary paiks, these groups had no obligation to render service to the king or the state.

The bandi-beti slaves could be bought and sold, although the sale of slaves was socially disapproved. In contrast, bahatias, bhakats, dewalias, and temple paiks were generally tied to the land and could not be separated from it for sale. Despite their low status, these servile groups often enjoyed greater security than the ordinary kanri paiks, who were frequently called upon for military and labour service during times of war. Because of the hardships faced by kanri paiks, some even sold themselves to wealthy individuals, despite legal restrictions. Powerful officials sometimes exploited the weakness of the government by illegally converting assigned paiks into slaves and taking control of their lands.

During the later phase of Ahom rule, debt slavery became a widespread social problem. Poor individuals who were unable to repay their debts often mortgaged themselves or their labour to creditors for an indefinite period. Mortgagers, called bandha (bonded labourers) were in course of time converted into slaves in most cases. During the early years of British occupation, thousands of slaves and bondsmen were liberated. However, During the early years of British occupation, thousands of slaves and bondsmen were liberated.

8.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this Unit, you have learned that:

- The Ahom revenue system was based on the Paik system, where every able-bodied male rendered labour and military service to the state. The Koch kingdom, on the other hand, relied mainly on land revenue collected through the Jotedari system.
- Agriculture was the chief occupation of the people, and rice was the staple crop. The Ahoms introduced advanced wet-rice cultivation, irrigation, embankments, and land reclamation, which increased agricultural productivity.
- The Ahom rulers promoted internal trade by establishing hats (markets) at strategic locations. Markets facilitated the exchange of surplus goods among different communities. Although the Ahoms initially followed a restrictive policy, trade with Bengal expanded after the expulsion of the Mughals. Major exports included silk, ivory, lac, musk, agarwood, and cotton, while salt was the most important import.
- Medieval Assam became famous for silk weaving, bell-metal work, oil-crushing, and other crafts. Artisans were organized under official supervision and produced goods for both local consumption and trade.
- Slavery and serfdom formed an important part of the medieval Assamese economy. Slaves, serfs, temple servants, and bonded labourers worked on agricultural estates and served nobles, temples, and religious institutions.

8.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1: Pratap Singha
Ans to Q 2: Labour
Ans to Q 3: State
Ans to Q 4: Sualkuchi
Ans to Q 5: Labour and Military Service

Ans to Q 6: Sarthebari
Ans to Q 7: Royal Lands Under Direct Control of The King
Ans to Q 8: Got
Ans to Q 9: Rupit
Ans to Q 10: Lakhiraj Lands

8.9 FURTHER READING

Barua, S.L., (1993). *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.

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Guha, Amalendu., (1983). *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity and Economy*, K.P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta.

Barua, G.C., (1930), *Ahom-Buranji (From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule)*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, Assam.

MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each question within 50 words)
Q 1: What was the main basis of the Ahom Paik System?
Q 2: Which officials conducted land surveys under the Ahom administration?
Q 3: What was the main source of state revenue in the Koch kingdom?
Q 4: What is meant by Assal and Abooab in the Koch revenue system?
Q 5: What was the role of hats in medieval Assamese economy?
Q 6: Name one special tax levied under the Ahom administration.

B) Short Questions (Answer each question within 150 words)
Q 1: Discuss the Paik System of the Ahom kingdom.
Q 2: Describe the role of artisans and craft production in medieval Assam. Highlight important centres such as Sualkuchi, Sarthebari, and Ramdia and their economic importance.
Q 3: Discuss the significance of internal trade in medieval Assam, focusing on hats (markets), barter system, and trade with neighbouring hill communities.
Q 4: Define the term “Khel” in the Ahom administrative system.

C) Long Questions (Answer each question within 300-500 words)
Q 1: Evaluate the nature of slavery, serfdom, and bonded labour in medieval Assam. Explain how these systems were linked with land grants and agrarian economy.
Q 2: Examine the Koch land revenue system in detail with special reference to the Jotedari system.
Q 3: Examine the role of agriculture in medieval Assam and explain how geographical conditions influenced cropping patterns, tools, and productivity.