

## **The Relations Between the People of Hills and Plains in the pre-colonial period of Assam with special reference to the Posa system of the Ahom administration**

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### **Introduction :**

In the pre-colonial period of Assam, Assam was specially ruled by the Ahom rulers. The Ahom rulers during their long lasted regime of 600 years generally followed an unique policy of conciliation towards the hill tribes. The kingdom of Assam was bounded on the northeast and south by hills inhabited by various tribes, each with its distinctive manners. Customs and languages. As the tracts inhabited by the hill tribes did not yield well enough to meet their requirements, they used to make inroads into the fertile foothill plains inside the Ahom territories and sometimes forced the plain people to give their produce and services to them. The Ahoms, on their part, usually avoided retaliatory expeditions against these tribes, which were not only expensive but unpredictably hazardous. Of course, in order to put a stop to the inroads of the hill people to the bordering territories the Ahom Government either gave them fertile lands at the foot of their hills called khats along with access to certain fisheries in the plains or the payment of a stipulated amount called posa consisting of such articles as rice, cloth, cattle etc to be collected from a class of paiks called bahatiyas assigned to them or the privilege of having commercial transactions with the plains. In return for this, they were to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Ahom King and pay him an annual tribute consisting of the articles produced in their respective hill areas.

The contact of the plainsmen with the hill tribes was only occasional. The tribes are usually content to live their lives in the hills in isolation. There were several occasions of contact between the people of the hills and those of plains. One occasion was when they used to meet the plainsmen with whom they exchanged their hill products. Thus trade was an occasion of contact. The few mountain passes were the only routes by which they used to

come down to the plains and maintained contact with the Ahom's subjects in the plains. The tract between the foot of the hills and the valley where the plains reach out to the hills is very fertile. Such tracts of land are called 'Duars'. The inhabitants of these duars were often the victim of cruel raids and plunder by the tribes. The hills do not produce all necessities for life, adequate number of labourers was also wanting in the hills to work in their barren lands and very few fertile fields. Economic necessities, therefore, led the tribes to cast their greedy eyes on the plains at the foot of their hills. Whenever there was any scarcity of food, they would raid the villages in the plains. They used to plunder the inhabitants and often carry them off to their hills and reduce them to slavery.

The Ahom Government had to protect their subjects who lived in the submontane areas against the raids of the tribes. The Ahom King Pratap Singha was the first one who evolved a sound policy to deal with some of the tribes of the northern hills. He introduced the system of paying 'Posa' to the Charduaria, Bhutias, the Akas, the Daflas and the Miris. The Posa is a kind of payment that was made by the inhabitants to the tribes to buy off their raids. The Ahom King used to select a number of villages in the plains and instructed them to pay certain commodities to a particular tribe. In return, the king exempted them from equivalent amount of taxes payable to his government. The tribes who received these payments or posa annually refrained from making any attacks on the plainsmen at the foot of their hills 'The Posa' is an admission, on the part of the Ahom Kings, of the right of the tribes to a share of the produce of the land at the foot of their hills.

**Objective of the study :** The main objective of the study is to find out the actual aim of the Ahom Government. Secondly, to find out the policies adopted by Ahom rulers towards the hill people. Finally to find out howfar the relations with the tribes of hills brought about a cordial atmosphere/environment between plains and hills. To analyze the relevance of that relations in the present day scenario.

**Review of literature :** We have found a number of literally works on the various aspects of Assam during the time of Ahom regime. Sir Edward Gait's **A History of Assam** (1905) is a pioneer work on the history of medieval Assam (Ahom rule) and deals with in details the political and administrative aspects of the time, but the book does not make detailed discussion of the relations between the people of hills and plains.

**Assam Buranji :** written by Gunabhiram Boruah (1876, reprint Guwahati 1972) does not comphasize the subject matter of our study. Hiteswar Barboruah's **Ahomar Din**(1981) also fails to incorporate in details the present study. **The comprehensive history of Assam, Vol - III**, edited by H.K. Borpujari does not particularly highlight the relations between plains and

hills. **A comprehensive History of Assam** of S.L. Baruah, **Assam under the Ahoms** by Uma Nath Gohain, **Ahom-Tribal relations** of Laxmi Devi also clearly not highlight the present study. Hence, there is ample scope to undertake research project on the present subject and to focus, study, discuss and bring to light the various aspects of the relations between plains and hills in the precolonial period of Assam.

**Methodology** : The study is based on collection of data both from primary and secondary sources. The primary datas have been collected through direct personal inderview with the people of various places of Assam and Hills. The Secondary datas have been collected from various published and unpublished sources.

**A brief account of the relations of the Ahom Government with different hill tribes :**

The Lhota, Konyak and Ao Nagar in the south carried frequent raids on the plains of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. The Ahoms followed a similar policy like the grant of 'Posa' in dealing with these hill tribes. As the Nagar of the Patkai hill do not possess sufficient extent of fertile lands, Ahom King Pratap Singha granted them lands in the plains at the foot of their hills. These lands were called "Naga Khat". The Naga katakis were appointed by the Ahom Government to look after these lands. The tribes who received these advantages from the Ahom Government remained loyal to them.

The tribes such as the Charduaries, the Daflas, Akas, the Miris and the Nagas used to pay annual tribute with their hill products. The Government posted officials at the points where the passes descend to the hills. The tribes were allowed trading facilities on condition that they did not commit any atrocities on the plainsmen. If, however they committed any raid by violating the agreements in that case, expeditions were sent to punish them. Sometimes the passes to the 'Duars' were closed and the tribes were not allowed to come down from their hills into plains. In such circumstances, the tribes were compelled to surronder to the Ahom Government, driven by their economic necessities.

The relation of the Ahom Government with the Bhutias of Bhutan, Mishmis and Jaintias was different. The Bhutias paid annual tribute for the submontane tracts of the Darrang district to the Ahom Government. They have to hand over the control of the three passes of Darrang from July to November every year to the Ahom King.

The mishmis, occupying the hills to the east of the hill-tract inhabited by the Adis were divided into several clans. There is only one instance of Mishmis attack throughout the entire period of Ahom rule in Assam and that was in 1675. But they were brought to submission. Unlike other hill tribes, the mishmis did not possess the right to Posa. They were traders monopolising the central market of the North-eastern hill tribes at Sadiya. The trading

facilities offered by the Ahom government must have been greatly appreciated by the Mishmis, who avoided causing any offence to it.

The Jayantiyas are a Khasi tribe called syntengs. Their Kingdom included two entirely distinct tracts of the country, the Jayantiya hills which was their original abode and the plains country south of these hills and north of the Barak river, which was a later extension.

During the reign of Ahom King Pratap Singha, the Ahom Government first came into contact with the Jayantiyas which ultimately established markets in the plains within the Ahom Kingdom for the Jayantiya traders. The Jayantiya King used to remind the Ahom King, times without number, of that age-old bond of friendship in such words as these. "Garhgaon and Jayantiya are not two places, they are but one. The sun may rise in the west, the river Brahmaputra may flow upwards, the crows may become white, but the friendship between these two kingdoms will remain intact."

Of all the Khasis, the Ahom Government had contact mainly with those of the Khyrim or Khairam state, which had its capital at Nongkrem, not far from the present town of Shillong. The Khairmese like the Jayantiyas were granted free commercial intercourse with the plains and were allowed to establish markets there. There was, in fact, uninterrupted trade relations between Khairam and Assam. In the reign of Ahom King – Rudra Singha, a Khairm embassy was received at Gauhati in August 1704, which strengthened the relations between the two Kingdoms.

The territory of the Garos was bounded by the Brahmaputra on the north and west, Mymensing and sythet on the south and the khasi states on the east. They were divided into a number of clans, each controlled by one or more chiefs. The Ahom Government had no contact with the Garos of the interior hills. It was only with their counter parts living in the lower ranges of the hills as well as in the foothill region that the Assamese had commercial relations. These Garos adopted the mode of living of the plains and came to be known as Hajongs and a section of them subsequently became koches.

The Ahom Government had practically no connection with the tribes in the Lushai hills, though there is evidence to show that they knew the kukis through their envoys to Tripura who proceeded through the Lushai hills.

The Singphos were the most powerful and formidable of the hill tribes in the north-east. "Twelve of the Singpho Chiefs", says David Scott, were also nominally subject to Assam, but did not pay tribute."

The Mikirs, who call themselves Arlengs and later Karbi Arlongs, originally settled in North Cachar hills, but were driven westward into Jayantiya territory by the Kacharis. Dissatisfied with the treatment accorded to them there, they migrated to their present site - the hills between the Kapili and the Dhansiri rivers. The Ahom Government granted them khats and access to some fisheries in the plains. The Mikirs gave the least trouble to the Ahom government. Only once in 1765, they made a thrust into the Ahom territory but they were easily subdued.

The Akas called themselves Hrusso and lived in the hills to the west of the Bharali river in the Darrang district, now forming a part of the Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. They were divided into two clans, one of which was granted the privilege of the posa system. The other clan was referred to as Kopah-Chor or cotton stealers because of their practice of lurking in the cotton-fields till they found opportunities to attack villagers and extort posa at night. The Kopah-Chor clan was long a terror in Darrang.

The Daflas called themselves 'Nishis' lived in the hills stretching from the Bharali river on the west and the upper courses of the suvansiri river on the east in Kameng and suvansiri districts of present day Arunachal. The Daflas are not a single tribe but a collection of petty clans, independent of each other. The chiefs of the Clans are known as Gams.

The Daflas made frequent inroads to the Ahom kingdom and used to carry away a large number of men as slaves. All possible measures of threat and conciliation on the part of the Ahom Government, beginning with the days of Pratap Singha, including the offer of a comparatively higher rate of posa, failed to stop their acts of plunder in the bordering Ahom territories. Ahom King Rudra Singha temporarily subjugated them but soon after his death, they shook off the Ahom allegiance and repeated their attacks on the Ahom territories. During the period of the Moamariya rebellions, the Daflas and the Dafla bahatiyas in league with the Moamariyas rose into rebellion and on one occasion they even proceeded as far as Duimunisila near Kaliabor in the south bank. But they finally sustained a major defeat at the hands of the royalist soldiers.

**Conclusion :** The political foresight and the wisdom of the Ahom rulers are best proved by their policy towards the hill people. From the beginning of their rule in Assam, the Ahoms had to come into close contact or relation with the people living in the hills. Sometimes their relations with them was very friendly, but at times their relation was hostile. The wisdom of the Ahom Kings lay in the fact that they succeeded in the end in framing a practical policy to deal with them and the Ahom policy in regard to the tribes lasted their rule and it was generally followed by the British and in some respects, it is followed even today. Various

factors were responsible for the relationship between the plains people and the hill people. Trade was an occasion of contact between the two sides. When they used to meet the plainsmen with whom they exchanged their hill products. The tract between the foot of the hills and the valley where the plains reach out to the hills was very fertile, on the other hand, the hill areas were comparatively barren lands and the hills do not produce all necessities for life. Economic necessities therefore led the tribes to cast their greedy eyes on the plains at the foot of their hills. At the time of any scarcity of food, they would raid the villages in plains. They used to plunder the inhabitants and often carry them off to their hills and reduce them to slavery.

The Ahom Government had to protect their subjects who lived in the submontane areas against the raids of the tribes. Ahom King Swargadeo Pratap Singha was the first King who introduced of paying 'Posa' to the Miris, Daflas, Akas and Bhutiyas. Under this system – a number of villages at the foot of every hill was placed under the control of the tribes. Katakis were also appointed to stop the acts of oppression committed by the Miris and Daflas. With the same end in view, he granted to the Nagas some lands in the plains in the districts of Sivasagar and Lakhimpur at the foot of the hills. This lands were called 'Naga-Khat'. In order to the administer these lands, Ahom officials called 'Naga-Kataki' were appointed. These measures gave security to the Ahom subjects from the raids of the tribes which were probably were frequent. The settlement made by Pratap Singha for dealing with the tribes was continued till the last days of Ahom rule. Even the British did not abolish the entirely the system of Pratap Singha. It shows the foresight and uncommon wisdom of Pratap Singha.

In the pre-colonial period of Assam, during the reign of Ahom rulers whatever policies were adopted for dealing with the hill people, were not only a good but also a far reaching policy for maintaining a cordial relations between the plains and hill areas. By the policies, there occurred peaceful atmosphere for the people of both sides. At present, sometimes there take place tense relations between the two sides and the situation becomes beyond control. In such kinds of situations, the policies adopted by the Ahom Government at that time, may also normalise the relations between the plains and hills. So, we can not ignore the policies of the Ahom rulers in dealing with the tribes of the hills. To speak the truth, the policies of the Ahom Government were very positive and such policies may also be adopted as harbinger to remove such kinds of exciting moments occurred in the present days.

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