

Ahom-Nyishi Trade Relations in Lakhimpur Duars under Ahom Rule

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Abstract: The Ahom kingdom, established by Chowlung Sukapha in 1228 C.E., initially had its capital at Charaideo (1253 C.E.). Its territorial boundaries extended from Buri Dihing in the north to the Dikhow River in the south, with the foothills of the Naga Hills and the Patkai range in the east and the Brahmaputra River in the west. Sukapha engaged with frontier hill tribes, including the Nagas. During the reign of Ahom king Suklengmung, the kingdom's boundaries expanded to both sides of the Brahmaputra River, reaching the northern frontier hills. This expansion brought the Ahom kingdom into contact with tribes such as the Nagas and the Michimi. However, sustained relations with the hill tribes were most prominent during the reign of Ahom king Pratap Singha, who implemented a conciliatory policy toward groups such as the Nagas, Akas, Nyishi, Bhutias, Michimi, and Parbotia Miris. As part of this policy, Pratap Singha granted Posa to the hill tribes. To prevent raids, the hill tribes were granted access to rampat, or Duar passes, facilitating entry and exit to the plains. Additionally, markets (hats) were established in the foothills, enabling the hill tribes to exchange goods for necessary commodities. Over time, a structured trade system developed between the Ahoms and the hill tribes, yielding economic benefits and fostering socio-cultural bonds between the hill and plain communities. Among these tribes, the Nyishi of the Lakhimpur Duar areas played a significant role in trade under Ahom rule. This paper examines the trade relations between the Ahoms and the frontier hill tribes, with particular emphasis on the Nyishi tribe in the Duar areas of present-day Lakhimpur.

Keywords: Posa, Frontier Hill Tribes, Duars, Commodities, Nyishi.

Introduction

From early times, many tribes migrated from different regions to the hills of Arunachal Pradesh, crossing mountain passes and hilly tracks, thereby opening new lines of communication with adjoining areas. Gradually, these types of communication were also open to trade relations with new areas like Bhutan and Burma, and even expanded to Lassa and Tibet. With the advent of the Ahoms and the establishment of the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley, there were a lot of changes in the social, cultural, political, and economic lives of the people of this region. One important aspect of the Ahom rule was to communicate with

and expand trade with the frontier hill tribes. The specific features of the trade system included three types of trade: domestic trade, trade with neighbouring hill tribes, and external trade with other countries. The Ahom state had trade relations with the frontier hill tribes such as the Akas, Daphalas, Nagas, Parbotia Miris, and the Bhutias. The principal items of the trade system were agrarian products, forest products, mineral products, animals, silk threads, and clothes.

Statement of the Problem

The Present study analyzes the Ahoms' trade and trade relations with the Nyishi from the historical perspective. The Nyishi are the largest population of present Arunachal Pradesh. During Ahom reign they were the inhabitant from the hill's areas of the River Bharali to Dollungmukh. The paper will highlight the trading activities between the Ahom state and the Nyishi in the duar areas of Present Lakhimpur District. The study will also analyse whether the Ahom state's policy had any impact on trade and the economy in the duar areas of Lakhimpur.

Research Questions:

1. Did the Ahom State implement any measures to develop trade relations with the Nyishi tribe?
2. What factors influenced trade relations between the Ahom State and the Nyishi tribe?
3. Did the Ahom State's policy have any impact on trade and the economy in the duar areas of Nyishi North of the Brahmaputra?

Significance of the Study

The Present study highlights about the nature of the Ahoms' trade system and focuses on the raw materials transactions of medieval Assam. Further, the study has focused on the communication system, geographical description, political, and socio-cultural relations between Ahoms and the Nyishi of the Duar areas of present Lakhimpur district.

Review of Literature

A lot of works has so far been published in and around the topic describing trade between the Ahoms and the frontier hill tribes including Nyishis.

Sir Edward Gait's *History of Assam* mentions about the trade relations between Ahoms and the Nagas, Bhutias, Lushais, Nyishis, Akas and the other neighboring tribes.

S.K. Bhuyan's (ed), *Tungkhungia Buranji* mentions about the hats or markets of the foothills of the Naga Hill and Naduar, Charduar, Chaiduar etc. The book also mentions about exchange commodities.

S.N. Sharma's *Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam* mentions about the internal and external trade of medieval Assam.

Sarbananda Rajkumar's *Itihase Suwara Sasosa ta Basor* mentions about the nature of trading system as well as the officials who were observe to trade relations with the hill tribes.

Agrarian System of Medieval Assam composed by **Jahnabi Gogoi Nath** mentions about the trade system between the Ahoms and the frontier kingdoms. The book also mentions about the Ahom's trade relations with the frontier tribes like Nyishi, Akas, Nagas and Michimi etc.

Objective of the Study

The chief objectives of the present study are

- i. To examine the trade activities between the Ahoms and the Nyishi in Lakhimpur duars
- ii. To study the impacts of trade relation between the Ahoms and the Nyishi.

Research Method

The Present work will be a descriptive and interpretative analysis. The study shall be based on the analysis of the primary and the secondary data available in the libraries (Government, local and private) and archives of both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The myths, legends, and folktales will also be of worth to bring clarity to the subject. We have used Journals, periodicals, research papers, and also used help internet as secondary source.

Ahom Policy towards Nyishi

The relations between the Ahoms and the Nyishi first began during the reign of Ahom king Sukhampha. The Nyishi fought against the Ahoms in support of the Koch army.¹ Later, Nyishi raids in the foothills led to conflict with the Ahom state. King Pratap Singha took a conciliatory policy towards the Nyishi. Therefore, the Ahom king granted the Nyishi some privileges, such as Posa.² Under Posa, the Nyishi had the right to collect commodities they needed. Instead, the Nyishi had to pay taxes to the Ahom king.

Ahom king Pratap Singha recognized the passes between hills and the plains as duars. He appointed Duaria Boruah, Daphala Phukan, and Kotokies to negotiate with the Nyishi. Further markets or hats were established at the duar areas. Pratap Singha took these steps to protect his subjects from raids by hill tribes. To increase the kingdom's revenue, he sought to expand trade relations with the frontier hill tribes. Moreover, because of

¹ Padma Bora, *Asom Buranjir Prakshapottat Oitihyamondita Narayanpur Aru Anyanya* published by Dilip Kumar Baruah, 2011, Narayanpur, p.46

² S. Dutta and B. Triparthy, *Sources of the History of Arunachal Pradesh*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2008, p.145

increased foreign invasions of the Ahom state, such as the Mughals, it was essential to form alliances with the frontier tribes and neighboring Kingdoms.³

Trade and Commerce in the Duar Areas of Present Lakhimpur

During the Ahom reign, especially under Swargadeo Pratap Singha, political, social, and economic relations between the hill tribes and the plains improved. The Posa system is a collection system in which people of the hills collect from the people of the plains. But it gradually expanded as trade in products increased, leading to trade with the hill tribes. Based on the field survey, we need some names of hats or bazaars near the duars of Chaiduar and to the east of Chaiduar, present Lakhimpur. The following are the hats⁴

Bali Hat

Bali *hat* was one of the famous hats in the Pichola-Durpang and Rajgarh region. The *hat* was held at present Simoluguri near Rangati. The *hat* was continued before the Burmese invasion. The Nyishi people of the Chaiduar areas, such as Dubia, Chengmara, Pichola, and Dikrong Valley, came from the hills and exchanged their commodities with people from the plains. Bali Hat was famous for Brinjal.

Table

Exchange Commodities	Collecting Commodities
Fivemouth Taroroot(Panchamukhi Kachu)	Rice
A long type of Potatos	Beetal Nut-Pan
Dry Meat	Brinjal
Dao	Khania Kapur (Eri Clothes)
Animal Skins and horns especially Deer	

Source: *An interview with the ex-head teacher and ex-President of the Development Committee of Maghnowa Dol – Sri Nomal Gogoi, 89 years old. He heard about this hat from his father, grandfather, and the aged people of this village.*

Dol Hat

Dol Hat is currently in Naoboicha Circle, Lakhimpur, and lies on the border with Arunachal Pradesh. The Singira River and the Pabho River flow from the Daphala hills. Oral sources say a King who followed Vaisnavism established a Dol at Phulbari. ⁵The Archaeological Department of Assam recovered an image of Vishnu dating to the 8th century at Phulbari. A market was growing near the Dol, which came to be known as Dol hat. Commodities collected by the Nyishi or the Daphalas included cow, Goat, betel-pan, clothes, rice,

³ Tana Shoren, *The Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh. An Ethnohistorical Study*, Regency Publication, New Delhi 2006, p.157s

⁴ The word *hat* is derived from Assamese word which mean market or bazar

⁵ Ramchandra Chutia *Mohamayee Arunachal Pradesh Aru Iyar Janajati*, published by Saraswati D.N. Prakashan, Guwahati, Assam, 2016, p.184

etc. Tungkhungia Buranji states that during the “Chatra Bhang Yug” of Swargadeo Siva Singha, his queen, Phuleswari, became Bor Raja and destroyed all the idols of the Vaishnava Satras and monasteries of Assam. Phuleswari Konwari also destroyed the Phulbari Dol.⁶ The Daphala settlement was covered up to Hatilung, near Ranganadi. To protect against the Daphalas' raids, Siva Singha appointed Naoboicha Phukan.⁷ The region was also known as Daphalapar or Banskata. The influence of the Daphalas persisted throughout the region until 1930 C.E.⁸

Phukonar Hat

Phukonar Hat is currently 10 Kilometers from North Lakhimpur town. According to John Peter Wade, the Phukan Hat was one of the old markets under the Ahom rule. The *hat* was established by Naoboicha Phukan during the reign of Ahom King Chakradhraj Singh.⁹ The nearest rivers to Phukan's hat are Somdiri, Ranganadi, and Subansiri. Hill tribes like the Nyishi, Apatanis, Abors, and the Parbotia-Miris of the Ranganadi Valley and the Subansiri regions attended the fairs at the Phukonar hut. Choutangs, Garoimoria Tekelas had accompanied the Gams of the hills.¹⁰

Exchange Commodities	Collecting Commodities
Tem (Millet)	Rice
Sweet Potato	Beetal Nut-Pan
Animals' dry meat especially Methun.	Brinjal
Chili.	Eri Clothes)
Daos	Lime (Chun)

Source: Durbin, Benudhar Sharma, Page 6-7, An Account of Assam, John Peter Wade, Chapter II, p.24.

The Impact of the Trade System on the Duar Areas of Lakhimpur

One impact of trade on Nyishi society in the duar areas was the influence of the Assamese language on the Nyishi. It can be said that the Assamese language has become the second language among the Nyishi people inhabiting the duar areas or passes of Pichala –Durpang- Rangati-Rajgarh of the present Narayanpur areas, Dikrong or Harmoti pass of the Bandar hills (Present Bandardewa, border between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh), and Dubia- Kalabari of the present Gohpur area, Dollungmukh (Lakhimpur), Bordalani, and Sisi of the present Dhemaji district. Still, the Assamese language is used by the Nyishi people of these areas. The Nyishi people of the duar regions used basic words after the names of things or places, such as 'tu', 'de', 'na', etc. For example, *Mitir tu, Atai tu, Mota tu, Maiki tu, dao tu, Mas tu de, Ja de*, etc¹¹.

⁶ Op. cit. Ramchandra Chutia, p.184

⁷ ibid

⁸ Op. cit. Ramchandra Chutia, p.185

⁹ Nityananda Senapati, Naoboichar Ek Bornil Itihas, p.27

¹⁰ Benudhar Sharma, *Durbin*, p.13

¹¹ Surya kumar Bhuyan, *Studies in the History of Assam, Laksheswari Bhuyan*, 1964, p.46

Interaction between the Nyishi and the people of the plains facilitated mutual language acquisition, fostering goodwill and friendship. Consequently, the terms *mita* (derived from the Sanskrit word *mitra*, meaning friend) and *atai* (friend) were adopted. These words continue to be used among the Nyishi and the people of the plains in the border areas between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, particularly in the Duar areas of Lakhimpur.

Agriculture

Another impact of the trade System was seen on the agriculture of the Nyishi inhabitants in the duar areas of Lakhimpur. Ahom literary sources indicate the locations of the Nyishi settlements during the reign of the Ahoms, from the hill mouth of the Bharalu River to the east of the Chaiduar, present-day Dollungmukh in Lakhimpur. Ahoms, Chutias, Koibottras, and the Koches were the inhabitants of the plain areas of the duar regions.

In early times, the main occupation of the Nyishi people of the hills was hunting and fishing. They also depended on Jhum Cultivation or Shifting Cultivation. In the Kalika Purana, the Charyageet refers to the use of the instruments of the Fal (plow share), *Sichani* (water bailer), *Khanti* (*Spud*) and Kuda. The Yogini Tantra of the 16th century and the Katha Guru Charit mention various varieties of Agricultural crops, such as *Briha*, *Keteki*, *Raktasali*, *Narayana*, *Pradipa*, *Ashoka*, *Soma*, and *Kalabina*¹². During the 15th and 16th centuries, the agricultural lands of the Subansiri and Dikrang Valleys were much more fertile, with higher crop yields. In the markets of the duar areas, crops demands were also increased.¹³

Dress

The trade system also affected people's dress in the hills and the plains. Spinning and weaving were an indispensable profession of every Assamese household.¹⁴ Some changes were observed, especially in the dresses of the Nyishi people of Chaiduar and the east of Chaiduar, now in the duar areas of Lakhimpur. The chief centers of silk production north of the Brahmaputra were Habung, Banfang, Jakaichuk, and Kalangpur.¹⁵ Before the Ahoms' arrival, the areas were under the Bhuyans' administration.¹⁶ Ahom king Suhungmung had expelled the Bhuyans from Banfang and appointed Thao Mungktok to administer the area.¹⁷ Japoribhita (Tatibhar) was one of the places of cloth production during the Bhuyan reign and later on the Ahom reign.¹⁸ Every woman of Japoribhita was an expert in rearing eri, muga, and the Gomcheng. They also manufactured silk clothes at Rangati. As per the terms of Posa, the people of the Duar areas had to give khonia kapor (double

¹² Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam* p.152

¹³ Op.cit. Amalendu Guha, p.153

¹⁴ Fathiya-i-Ibriya: Robinson William, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Sarskaran Prashasan, New Delhi, 1987.p.273

¹⁵ Op.cit. Borah Padma p.84.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Cited in Ibid

¹⁸ An interview with Nagen Gogoi, retired teacher of Maghnowa M.E. School of Rangati on 07/6/2024.

cloth) and pat clothes to the Nyishi people, along with other commodities.¹⁹ Eri, Pat, Muga, and Gamocha became popular among Nyishi men and women from the Ahom period to the present day. Thus, in the trade system with the Nyishi, these dresses played an important role.

Food

The Nyishi people had their own food customs. Traditional food preparation included roasting, steaming, and smoking meat, wild leaves, chili, and bamboo shoots. Meat became an item of food after, followed by cock, etc. Oil was never used in food items. Rice beer was used as a traditional drink. Trade with the Ahom state led to changes in the food system of the Nyishi and the people of the plains of the Duar regions. For example, Assamese khar (made from mustard seeds), Polu (an insect used in the production of eri), and many vegetables such as Brinjal, cucumber, and pumpkin. Bamboo *sunga* is used as a cooking utensil by the Nyishi people. The people of the plains also used bamboo shoots, smoked meat, and sweet potatoes.²⁰

Religion

Trade relations between the Ahoms and the Nyishi also indirectly affected the religious landscape of the duar areas. Saktism and Vaisnavism influenced the Nyishi people of the duar areas. Nyishi people came to the plains to collect posa or trade, but the ideologies of Sanatan and Vaishnavism gradually influenced them.²¹ For example, the Nyishi people of Dikrong and Pichala valley came to worship at *Borkalika than*, *Petuagossani than*. On the other hand, the Nyishi people of the between Subansiri and the Dhal River Valley influenced by Vaisnavism and many Nyishi people became to disciple of Gharmara Satra of North Lakhimpur

Conclusion

Trade relations between the Ahoms and the Nyishi were largely reciprocal. The Nyishi tribes brought products from their hills and exchanged them for commodities from the Ahom kingdom. During the Ahom reign, the trade system continued mainly through barter. Sometimes political issues affected the trading system. If Nyishi raids increased in the border areas, the Ahom king blocked the duars. Sometimes natural calamities also disrupted trade between the Ahoms and the Nyishi. But the trade between the Ahoms and the Nyishi continued till the advent of the Europeans to the North-East.

¹⁹ Field Work on the areas between Pichola to Dulungmukh

²⁰ An interview with Tana Tech, ex. Goan Pradhan of Durpang Nyishi village on 23/7/2023.

²¹ S.L. Baruah *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshi Monoharlal, New Delhi, 1997, p.447

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