

Frontier Policy and Administration Under the Ahoms:A Review

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***Abstract:**The Indian history witnessed very few ruling dynasties whose rule sustained for a long span of time like those of the Ahoms. The Ahoms were descendants of the Tai people, originally from the Chinese province of Yunan who reached the Brahmaputra Valley in 1228 C. E. and settled in the upper portion of Assam and ruled it for almost long six centuries, a record period in Indian history, next only to the Cholas. Siu-ka-pha, the founder of the Ahoms laid the foundation of a sound civil administration which was further upgraded by his descendants. They followed a practical, pragmatic and wise policy in regard to their frontier administration which was not based on a rigid overlord-vassal relationship as the aim of the Ahom government was not extension of its sovereignty over the neighbouring principalities but establishment of friendly relationship with them on the basis of mutual benefit and understanding. By virtue of their sound and farsighted frontier policy towards the frontier hill tribes, the Ahoms could enhance their strength and also ensure neutrality of these tribes during the time of foreign aggression. The Ahoms allowed the tribal groups of the frontier areas to enjoy local autonomy and to preserve their traditional tribal set-up only at the cost of accepting nominal sovereignty. The Ahoms by their liberal norms and practices created a nice atmosphere for mixing of tribes. They interdined and intermarried freely with the frontier tribesmen. Such policy of course helped the Ahoms in ensuring the security and management of their frontier areas.*

***Keywords:** Ahoms, Frontier , Government, Sovereignty, Traditional,Tribe etc*

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Introduction

The Ahoms pursued certain traditional principles prescribed in the sacred ancient Hindu scriptures like *sam, dam, danda, bheda* while conducting frontier policy. In simple terms, the Ahoms applied conciliation, gifts or presents, punishment where necessary in dealing with the frontier tribes. Ahom history is replete with numerous instances of applications of these

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fundamental principles in dealing with the several frontier kingdoms and numerous tribes which surrounded Assam. Three local frontier governors of high rank were appointed as the heads of civil, revenue and military administration by the king at six strategic places known as *Datiyaliya Gohains*, whose status was inferior only to the Barbarua and the Barphukan.¹ The Ahoms seemed to pursue a pacific policy of 'live and let live' and did not try to subjugate the neighbouring tribal kingdoms which was of course a very pragmatic and practical policy. The Ahom government appointed frontier wardens or governors to conduct relations with the hill tribes. Thus, the *Sadiyakhowa Gohain* was in charge of regulating relations with the tribes of the Sadiya country viz. the Abors, Miris, Misimis and later the Khamtis and the Singphos; the *Marangikhowa Gohain* and *Rahiyal Barua* were in charge of the Kacharis and the Mikirs; the *Jagiyal Gohain* and the *Kajalimukhiya Gohain*, of the Jayantiyas; and the Barphukan and the Darrang Raja, of the Bhutanese.²

Methodology

This research article is basically a qualitative study. The data accumulated from secondary sources have been discussed, analysed and evaluated. Books and journals pertaining to the Ahom history have been consulted while completing this research article. Historical method of analysis has been followed here.

I

The Ahom Government adopted wise and delicate adjustment while dealing the various frontier kingdoms, tribes and outlying areas. To fulfil this objective the government tried to ensure the services and cooperation of some specified agencies like frontier governors, *Chakial* governors and *Melkhowa Rajas*. With the expansion of the Ahom kingdom, the ruler appointed three local frontier governors at strategic locations known as *Datiyaliya Gohains*, corresponding to Political Agents as we understand today. They were governors, commanders of armies, judges and advisers of the king.³ These *Gohains* or officers enjoyed lower status than those of the three *Dangarias*.⁴ They were on par with the Barbarua and the Barphukan but exercised less powers and had no power to inflict capital punishment. Yet, as representatives of the king, they enjoyed high rank.⁵ They needed to make contributions to the Ahom forces from their respective

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territories as required. Each of them was provided one thousand troops for safety and protecting their territories from inroads of the nearby hill tribes. They had to fight at any place if needed and the ruler directed. These governors conducted commercial and political relations with the bordering states with the cooperation of a few frontier wardens. The Ahoms, however, were ever vigilant against rebellion. So as a security against rebellion, the frontier governors had to be relatives of the *Gohains* at the capital, the first two from the family of the Burhagohain and the third from that of the Bargohain.⁶

On the whole, the Ahom rulers sought to pursue a peaceful policy and went with the principle of live and let live. In other words, the Ahoms did not try to wipe out the existence of the neighbouring tribal kingdoms. The hill tribesmen were allowed to collect *posa*⁷ regularly which conciliated those tribes and hence expressed their allegiance to the Ahoms. Another pragmatic principle was that the Ahoms perceived the necessity of decentralizing authority as far as possible. As such, several assistants, Baruas or Phukans were there to help and advise the frontier governors and the Chakial Gohains in discharging their duties.

The *Sadiyakhowa Gohain*, stationed at Sadiya got an assignment of 100 *paiks* and was reinforced by 300 clan members of the Ahom *Gharphalias*, who were assisted by several Phukans and Baruas to realize the collection of revenue. King Suhungmung created the post of *Sadiyakhowa Gohain*. Sadiya was the capital of the Chutias, situated in the extreme upper portion of Assam. In 1523, Suhungmung annexed the whole Chutia territory to the ahom kingdom and entrusted it under the supervision of a Gohain. Since the Gohain was posted at Sadiya, he was called the *Sadiyakhowa Gohain*.⁸ The northern and eastern areas of Assam beyond Saikhowa were governed by *Sadiyakhowa Gohain*, who was helped by the *Sadiyal Barua*, the controller of the local archers, the *Sadiyal karis*. The subjugated Miris were organized as *Khels* for collection of revenue under the *Miri Barua*.

The *Marangikhowa Gohain*, with his headquarters at Marangi was to look after the south and south-western areas of Assam. Marangi was an outpost of the Ahoms in the lower part of the Dhansiri Valley. In 1536, Suhungmung annexed the whole Kachari territory west of the Dhansiri bordering the Naga hills and entrusted the region under a Gohain called *Marangikhowa Gohain*.⁹ He had to send a minimum of 20 *paiks* and 5 horses to the king and 3 horses to the Buragohain. As defender of the lower valley of the Dhansiri to its west from the Kacharis, the Nagas, the Mikirs and other hill tribes, he was called the 'Governor of the Naga marches'.¹⁰

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The northern hill tribes, viz. the Bhutias, Akas, Daflas and the Miris were dealt with by the office of *Salal Gohain* who was also to protect some *duars* or hill passes Chari-duar, Na-duar, Chaay-duar from the Dafla raids. When Barphukan's headquarters were transferred to Guwahati, the *Salal Gohain* was to look after the administration of the areas between those of *Marangikhowa Gohain* and the Barphukan in both sides of the Brahmaputra. A number of assistants, senior and junior, were there to help him: the *Kaliabaria Phukan*, *Khoang Phukan* and *Deka Phukan*. Among Baruas and others, there were Kachari Barua to realize revenue from the Kachari *Paiks*; *Solal Barua* from the *Solal chamuas*; the *Saharia Barua* from Darrang; the *Mikir Barua* from the Mikirs (around Mikirhat); besides the *Karal Barua*, the *Kharangi Barua*, the *Kharangi Hazarika*.¹¹

The considerations of the security of the Ahoms led the rulers to appoint wardens of *chokeys* (outpost on the frontier) called *Chakial Gohains*, related to the families of the king or of the three *Dangarias* and invested with some special powers: They had to keep amicable relations between tribes on hills and plains in the valleys of the Kallang and Kapili, and the Khasis and the Jayantias. Kajalimukh, the confluence of the Kallang and the Kapili and the Brahmaputra rivers in Nagaon area was a highly strategic site and hence selected as an important military and naval outpost of the kingdom.¹² Two *Kajalimukhiya Gohains* stationed at Kajali, being in over-all charge of the civil and revenue administration of the area. These two officers had the responsibility to protect the western frontier from the Jayantias, Kacharis and most importantly from those of the Mughals. The *Jagiyal Gohain* was posted at *Jagi Chokey*, about twenty miles north east of Guwahati who controlled the civil and revenue administration of the area, collected news for the king and maintained political relations with the Jayantias.

There were one *Chokey* or outpost known as *Hadirachokey* at Goalpara through which relation with Bengal could be established. An Ahom frontier officer was appointed at this place. This officer was to look into the trade and commerce between Assam and Bengal. This officer was a powerful because he stationed far away (from the Ahom capital).¹³ All the official communications were concluded between Assam and Bengal through this official.

There were seven *chokies* (outpost) viz. Gijing, Ghiting, Kukura kata, Tungkhang, Mahangar, Banrukhand and Dai-Gorongar for the management of the Ahom frontier affairs. Each *chokey* had its *chokial*, stationed at his respective *chokey* for collecting news of the

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respective area which were passed to the competent authority. The *chokials* were helped in discharging their duties and responsibilities by Baruas and Phukans.

The Ahoms by their liberal norms and practices created a wholesome atmosphere for mixing of tribes. They interdined and intermarried freely with the tribesmen.¹⁴ During the time of royal feasts, they often invited the Naga chiefs in particular. The Mikirs once found the Ahom soldiers leading an expedition to their hills, partaking of their food and drinks and were moved to comment in great delight: “These men eat the things we eat, they are therefore, men of our fraternity.”¹⁵ At this, the elder folks called back the youngsters, who had fled to the forests on the approach of the Ahoms, and several families of the Mikirs and the Lalungs immediately migrated to the Ahom territories. Intermarriage of the Ahom kings with the neighbouring hill tribes can be traced from the reign of Suhungmung or the Dihingia Raja, who had married a Manipuri princess.¹⁶ Some other Ahom kings also married the princess of the neighbouring hill tribes; and it was their farsighted tactic to get mixed with the already settled people here and get their goodwill. This policy of course helped the Ahoms in ensuring the security and management of their frontier areas.

The Ahom tribal policy was not based on a rigid overlord-vassal relationship because the aim of the Ahom government was not extension of its sovereignty over the hill areas but establishment of friendly relationship with them on the basis of mutual benefits and understanding.¹⁷ In return for such good gesture towards them, the hill tribes were to refrain from making inroads to the plains, pay a minimum annual tribute in the form of articles which were not available in the plains and most importantly acknowledge the suzerainty of the Ahom king. With the growth of the Ahom power, the tribal people unhesitatingly recognized it as the sovereign power of the region. Further, the grant of cultivable lands at the foot of their hills and commercial relations with the plains were so highly beneficial to them that the hill people, on their part, did not mind in acknowledging the suzerainty of the Ahoms, who allowed the tribal groups to enjoy full local autonomy and to preserve their traditional tribal set-up.¹⁸

By their wise and pragmatic policy towards the frontier hill tribes, the Ahoms could harness their strength and also ensure neutrality when there was any foreign aggression. A British officer wrote in 1883: “The Assamese army appears at this time (1660) to have been largely recruited from Nagas and Miris and it is evident that they were quite able to hold their own against the well-trained armies of Hindustan.”¹⁹ On the eve of the Battle of Saraighat, in an

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interview with the Mughal Commander Raja Ram Singh, the Ahom *Katoky*(envoy) referred to the tribal legion of the Assamese army which consisted of almost three lakhs of soldiers. In order to facilitate commercial transactions between the hills and the plains, the Ahom kings established several markets near the hills, which served to warm the hearts of the two people towards each other and to prop thereby the Ahom-tribal relations, till they were disturbed by the internal crisis of the Ahom monarchy and the subsequent foreign entanglements.²⁰

The family basis of the Ahom governmental system served as a great integrating force. Another feature of the Ahom policy which made for integration was to transform the vanquished and vassal ruling chiefs into local governors so that their domains, instead of being sources of disaffection, became constituent elements of the Ahom state, acting on its behalf. Such were Darrang, Rani, Beltola, Luki, Barduar, Bholagaon, Mairapur, Pantan, Bangaon, Bagiduar, Dimarua, Neli, Gobha, Sahari, Dandua, Barepujia, Topakuchia, Khaighoria, Panbari, Sora, Mayang, Dhing, Tetelia, Sahmara, Garakhia, Bagnara and Bhurbandha. Except the Raja of Rani, all had to pay an annual tribute. But one and all had to personally attend on the king with their stipulated contingents when asked for. Subject to these conditions, they enjoyed complete autonomy in internal affairs, collecting revenue and administering justice, subject to appeal from their orders to the Barphukan, Barbarua and the king. The hill Rajas among these were virtually independent.²¹

Conclusion

The Ahom rulers described Assam as *Sonar Saphura*, a casket of gold, which must not be opened to the foreigners.²² This necessarily indicated the self-isolation policy of the Ahoms which echoed the attitude of the east and south-east Asian nations viz. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Bhutanese etc. and wanted to remain aloof from outside contact.²³ However, settling in Assam they came to realise that the policy of isolation would not fulfil their ambition to become the master of the north-eastern part of this country. So, the Ahoms changed their attitude to the outsiders and adopted a pragmatic policy.

The Ahoms came to this land from the Yunan province of China with a view to ruling over here; and they succeeded in retaining their reign for long six hundred years which is actually a very long period in Indian history; in fact, they were second, only to follow the Cholas

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who ruled for almost fifteen hundred years. The Ahoms could rule for such a record period because something unique was there in their administration and their mechanism. When we turn the pages of ancient and medieval Indian history, we will notice that almost all the powerful dynasties annexed the neighbouring small principalities within their dominions and always followed an offensive policy in case of the frontier areas. But in case of the Ahoms, they allowed the frontier principalities to continue their rule on the condition of just accepting the Ahom suzerainty nominally. They created new frontier officers to carry on the Ahom administration at various frontiers as the rulers were aware that the nature and issues of the people and places varied and hence needed special attention to those particular frontiers. The efficient frontier officers carried on the Ahom administration in a pragmatic way. The Ahom- frontier tribal policy was not based on a rigid overlord-vassal relationship because they were in favour of establishing friendly relations on the basis of mutual benefits and understanding. As a consequence, we notice that whenever there were strong attacks on the Ahom kingdom from Bengal or Delhi by the Muslim invaders, the small principalities instantly came out in favour of the Ahoms against the foreign aggression; contrary to the normal belief that the neighbouring states stay hostile because of interest clash. All these happened due to the wise and farsighted policy of the Ahoms. It is seen that the existence of vassals or independent states are unwanted by a strong power within its vicinity because of political and strategic considerations. But in case of the Ahoms, they could afford the existence of some independent and semi-independent states without compromising their security and stability; rather the existence of such smaller states and principalities proved beneficial to them for security purpose, especially in raising an alliance against foreign aggression.

Notes and References

¹Sarkar, J. N., 'The Ahom Administration' in H. K. Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. III, Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, 2004, p.28.

² Baruah S. L., *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 2020, p. 381.

³ Sarkar, J. N., op. cit., p. 28.

⁴ The Burhagohain, Bargohain and Barpatragohain were known as *Dangaria* and held topmost status next only to the king.

⁵ Sarkar, J. N., op. cit., p. 28.

⁶ Sadar Amin, 95, 119; Barbarua, 420, 534-36; 546 as cited by J. N. Sarkar, 'The Ahom Administration' in H. K. Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. III, Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, 2004, p. 28.

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⁷ Under the *posa* system the bordering inhabitants of the Ahom kingdom had to provide various articles of daily necessities to the nearby hill tribes.

⁸ Acharyya, N. N., *The History of Medieval Assam*, New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 2003, P. 113.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Sarkar, J. N., op. cit., p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Sarkar, J. N., op. cit., p. 31.

¹³ Bhuyan, S. K., *Ahomor Din (Days of the Ahoms)*, Guwahati: Bani Mandir, 2014, p. 47.

¹⁴ Baruah S. L., op. cit., p. 381.

¹⁵ Quoted by S. L. Baruah in *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, p. 381 from *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, p. 122.

¹⁶ Baruah S. L., op. cit., pp. 381-82.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cited by S. L. Baruah in *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, p.383 from Captain John F. Michell, *Report on the North-East Frontier*, 1883, p. 30.

²⁰ Baruah S. L., op. cit., p. 383.

²¹ Quoted by Sarkar, J. N., 'The Ahom Administration' in H. K. Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. III, Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati, 2004, p. 33 from *Tungkhungia Buranji*, xxix, xxviii; Gait (1963), pp. 247-48.

²² Bhuyan, S. K., *Studies in the History of Assam*, Calcutta: Nabajiban Press, 1965, p. 150.

²³ Das, Suren, *Foreign Service System under the Ahoms* in G. J. Sudhakar (ed.), *Journal of Indian History and Culture*, Issue 34, December 2024, p. 173.