

Economy of Assam During the days of the Ahoms with special reference to Women

Dr. Meghali Bora*
Ms. Nomami Dutta**

Abstract

The general economic condition during the days of the Ahoms was not of high standard but there was no poverty or no scarcity in Assam due to the fact that women along with men contributed a large share for the upliftment of the economy. The economy of Assam during the days of the Ahom was agro-based as its soil was exceedingly fertile and well adapted for all kinds of agricultural products. Rice was the staple food of the people and therefore, production of paddy was the main cultivation. The villages were self sufficient and people did not produce any surplus for the purpose of trade. Women of that time performed all their routine work like cleaning of houses, washing of utensils, bringing water from rivers and ponds, cooking food, caring of children and elders. They also took part in gainful economic activities like agriculture, spinning, fishing and weaving and reared different kinds of worms called eri, muga and pat. The basic aim of the study is to describe the role of women to the development of economy of Assam during the Ahoms regime.

Keywords: Agriculture, Spinning, Weaving and Self Sufficient.

Introduction:

The Ahoms during their long reign of six centuries in Assam gave the people an efflorescent economy and it is for this reason Assam could successfully avert the Mughal invasions for seventeen times. The economy during the days of the Ahoms was agro-

*Assistant Professor & HOD, Dept. of Commerce, Gargaon College

E-mail: meghali.bora.saikia@gmail.com

**Assistant Professor, Dept. of Commerce, Gargaon College

E-mail: nomamidutta@gmail.com

based as it is present. Assam's soil is suitable for cultivation of various kinds of crops. The Ahoms during their reign cultivated not only different varieties of rice but varieties of pulses, other cereal crops, fruits and vegetables, sugarcane, mustard seeds, some amount of indigo etc. Women played an indispensable role in all agricultural production. Besides she had to spin and weave all the clothes necessary for their family. People also practised different arts and crafts. Besides there were certain industries like gold washing, iron smelting, salt making etc. Assam had trade relations with Mughal India as well as with Tibet and Bhutan. The Ahom kings promoted trade by setting up markets in different parts of the kingdom. But in the rigid framework of the *paik* system the peasants could not produce surplus to improve their lot or promote extensive business. Therefore, the people did not have any spirit of adventure or initiative. As a result Assam remained an economically backward state having limited contact with all India market.

Objectives:

1. To give an impression to the readers about the economy of Assam during the days of the Ahoms.
2. To describe the role of women to the development of economy of Assam during that time.

Significance of the Study:

The study assumes significance owing to the fact that insight into the past alone could correctly provide guidance to the people in all aspects of life. It is commonly agreed that economic governance is the key to the determination how far a country is developed or underdeveloped. In order to make the country economically affluent women along with men contributed their own share. This study is important to explore the role of women in economy during the regime of the Ahoms. It will also facilitate to uncover the quality of life of women at that time. The study will also help the future researchers to reflect the role of women in current economy of Assam in comparison to the women of the Ahoms regime.

Methodology of the Study:

The methodology adopted for the study is descriptive in nature. This study is entirely based on secondary data which are collected from books, journals, reports and research studies.

Economy of Assam:

Agriculture was the main source of economy during the days of the Ahoms. The Ahom kings considered agriculture as a noble profession and some of them before coming to Assam earned their livelihood through agriculture. Dignity attached to agriculture can be proved from the fact that the newly enthroned Ahom monarchs had to perform the ceremony of sacrificial ploughing at the time of his coronation (Bhuyan, 1965). It is also known that Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam, himself took to agriculture for three years before establishing his permanent capital at Charaideo [Bhuyan, 1962].

Economy of the period being self sufficient, people used to produce only what were needed by them. The Ahom kings in order to improve the economy of the state established markets at the strategic points of the kingdom and also in the foot hills areas where the neighbouring hill people could exchange their products with those of the plains. Hadirachoki which was also known as Bongalhat, situated on the other bank of the Goalpara, was the venue of trade between Assam, Bengal and Mughal India. But there were rigid control on the markets and strict supervision was made on all commercial dealings with the neighbouring tribes and kingdom. Traders were not allowed to contact with political agents (Bhuyan, 1949). The promises or information of the traders were not relied upon and it was thought that profit earning being the motto of the traders, they might unveil all the secrets to the enemies under the cover of trade (Baruah, 1997). But it is noticed that there was an export and import of goods from Assam to Bengal through Hadirachoki.

Role of women in:**a) Agriculture:**

Women took active part in the rearing of crops. They had to carry all the manual works. In the areas where there was no provision of ploughing or where cultivation was carried on by slash and burn method (*Zhuming*), women had to take the major part in cultivation. Transplanting and harvesting of crops were usually done by women and above all husking and grinding of crops were considered as a sole duty of women. Sugarcane planting was done by women alone. Many women also maintained kitchen gardens where vegetables, flowers and some medicinal plants were grown.

b) Spinning and Weaving:

During off time women reared different kinds of silk worms called *endi*, *muga* and *pat* from which different kinds of silk fibre were extorted. For rearing *muga*, Som trees were transplanted whose leaves were generally eaten by these worms. The Som fed worm yields the most delicate silk. There were also other two varieties of *muga* and these were *Champa* and *Mezankari*. The *Champa* silk is a fine white silk which is used only by the Ahom kings and nobles (Gohain, 1992). *Mezankari* is the most costly of all the silks. For *endi* worms a kind of plant called Era (*Ricinus Communis*) were grown in large numbers in vegetable gardens. For the fibres of these insects, a special kind of cloth called *EriShawl* was woven and this was done by women of castes and classes (Hamilton, 1963).

Besides these, women wove in their handlooms all their clothes required for their family such as *dhuti*, *chadar*, *mekhela*, *gamocha*, *challeng chador*, *riha*, *khonia*, shawls and everything. The skill of women in this craft was widely known and Mahatma Gandhi, when he visited Assam was so much impressed by the Assamese women's proficiency in this craft that he made the following remark - 'Every woman of Assam is a born weaver and she weaves fairy tales in cloth. I fell in love with the women of Assam as soon as I learnt that they were accomplished weavers' (Barua, 1991). The important fact was that during the days of Ahoms every woman including the queens knew how to spin and weave.

c) Embroidery and Dyeing works:

Assamese women were also proficient in embroidery. In embroidery works they used gold and silver wires called *guna* which were made by a class of people called *Gutakotia* (Gohain, 1992).

Dyeing among the Assamese people was an art of the past. The Assamese people generally did not dye the cloth but the thread. The materials used for dyeing and colouring were prepared from a kind of species known as lac and from various roots, leaves and barks of leaves (Chowdhury, 1966). Women of that time were very proficient in the art of dyeing.

d) Doll and Toy making:

Daughters and married women of that time were accustomed in the art of making dolls of different kinds and colours which could amuse the people of all the ages.

Previously dolls were made by their own hands with mud. Later a kind of instrument was prepared by which enough quantities of dolls and toys were made. Dolls and toys were made with bamboo, wood, cane, rotten cloth etc.

e) **Bamboo Works:**

Women also did minor bamboo works like making of fans, winnowing fans, baskets and some items of weaving. They also made *kula*, *dola*, *bisoni*, *chalon*, *dhari* and *pati*. The art of making these things was very common among the women of that time.

f) **Fishing:**

Fishing was an important occupation of a class of professional common women called *puharis*. There are frequent references in the *buranjis* and in the *Gurucharits* to this class of women. Those women generally used *jokai* and *kuki* for catching fish. They sold fishes in the *hats* or markets and from door to door. As there was little circulation of rupees or coins people's need was met through the barter system.

There are also women sellers dealing in betel nut, fishes, vegetables which are evident from *Katha-guru-Charit* [Lekharu, 1987]. Towards the later part of the Ahom rule some Muslim women also started shops in their houses (Barua, 1972).

g) **Different Industries:**

There were many cottage industries prevalent during the days of the Ahoms. Among such industries mention may be made to gold washing, salt making, iron smelting, jewellery making, ivory making, guns and cannons making, *gur* making, oil pressing, brick making, pottery, spinning and weaving, stone cutting, bell metal works, iron works etc. But pottery, spinning and weaving were the only household industries conducted by women of that time. As has been mentioned earlier all the women beginning from the queen down to the common women knew how to spin and weave. Pottery industry was one of the traditional and household industries which are still today carried on primarily with the help of the members of the family. Pottery works were done both by the *Kumars* and *Hiras*. The women of the *Hira* community made everything by hand. The articles of common use made by the *Hira* women were cooking vessels (*charu*), cups of different sizes (*mola*), small pots (*tekeli*), jars (*kalah*), earthen lamp (*saki*) etc. Some of the pots and jars specially made for royal household were often decorated with painting. Women also actively helped in making *gur* (molasses) from sugarcane.

Conclusion:

From the study it is seen that the principle of domestic as well as state economy during the days of the Ahoms was self sufficiency. Common people generally produced for their own consumption and therefore small surplus remained in their hands. No poverty and no scarcity was the maxim of the material life of the common people. Rice was the staple food and it was abundant. Numerous *beels* and rivers offered them a plentiful supply of fish, their gardens furnished vegetables and fruits and their cows and buffaloes unadulterated milk (Gohain, 1992). Their houses cost them nothing as the building materials like bamboo, wood, thatch and reed were collected from their lands and forests. Above all, women during that period helped in economy because an Assamese woman was a house keeper, spinner, weaver, cook as well as a wife and in many cases a farm labourer as well.

Reference:**Books:**

- Barua, G.R. (1972): *Assam Buranji*, Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.
- Barua, H. (1991): *The Red River and the Blue Hill*, Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall.
- Baruah, S.L. (1997): *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, New Delhi: Munshiram Monoharlal Publishers.
- Basu, N.K. (1970): *Assam in the Ahom Age*, Calcutta: Sanskrit PustakBhandar.
- Bhuyan, S.K. (ed.) (1962): *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.
- Bhuyan, S.K. (1949): *Anglo Assamese Relations (1771-1826)*, Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall.
- Bhuyan, S.K. (1965): *Studies in the History of Assam*, 1st edition, Guwahati: Laksheswari Bhuyan.
- Borgohain, J. (1985): *Asomar Arthanaitik Itihas*, Jorhat.
- Chowdhury, P.C. (1966): *The Civilisation and Culture of the People of Assam (to the 12th Century A.D.)*, Guwahati: Department of History and Art Studies, Government of Assam.

- Gait, E.(1994):*A History of Assam*, 6th edition, Reprint,Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall.
- Gohain, U.N.(1992):*Assam under the Ahoms*, 2nd edition, Guwahati: R.K. Publications.
- Guha A.(1982):*The Medieval Economy of Assam*, Raychaudhury, T., and Habib, I., (ed.), '*The Cambridge Economic History of India*', Vol. I., Cambridge University Press.
- Guha, A. (1991):*Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, Society, Polity and Economy*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi& Company for Centre for Studies in Social Sciences.
- Hamilton, Francis(1963):*An Account of Assam*, Bhuyan, S.K. (ed.), Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati.
- Lekharu, U.C. (ed.)(1987):*Katha-guru-Charit*, 15thedition, Nalbari: DuttaBaruah& Company.
- Neog, M. (ed.) (1947):*PrachyaSasanawali*,Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.

Journals and Periodicals:

- Barua, S.L. (1977): "Marketing System of Assam during the Days of Ahoms", *Assam Economic Journal*, Vol. III.
- Das, D. (1961): "AsamarHatidatarSilpa", *AsamBani*, on 06.01.1961.

