

Re exploring Medieval Assam: A Study of Administrative System Of Assam Under Mughals

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Abstract: Assam in the medieval period was a mixture of varied ethnic groups and communities with their own dialects, manners and customs. Historically, this period starts with the arrival of the Ahoms in the early part of the 13th century and continued until the termination of their rule in 1826.² One of the most significant events in the history of Assam is the Mughal invasion of Assam and the subsequent Mughal-Ahom conflict. Despite not having a permanent foothold over the region, the Mughals managed to bring various changes in the existing systems of the region, thus adding new fragments to it. The following paper is an attempt to re explore this period in order to examine the administrative system of Assam under Mughals and the changing dynamics of the same.

Keywords: Medieval, Assam, Mughal, Ahom, Administrative

By the beginning of the 16th century, the Mughals under Jahangir initiated their expansion policy towards Assam by subjugating the Kochs.³ During that period, the Kochs were at the peak of its power under its ruler Naranarayan and his brother Chilarai.⁴ The Mughals and the Kochs formed an alliance as a result of which the Afghan ruler of Bengal was defeated. However this glorious period was short lived and the Koch Kingdom came to an end with the death of its ruler, Naranarayan. The Koch kingdom got further divided into Koch Behar and Koch Hajo. These two divisions failed to maintain a cordial relationship with each other as a result of which the Mughals got an opportunity to make its way towards into the political sphere. Koch Behar submitted to the Mughals and consequently the latter conquered Koch Hajo with the help of Koch Behar. Soon after annexing Koch Hajo, a province called Bilayat Koch Hajo was established by the newly appointed Governor Mukarram Khan in 1616 A.D. with his administrative headquarter at Hajo.⁵ Jahangir further intended to apply the land settlement system of Delhi in Koch Hajo.⁶ He appointed an officer named Amir Sheikh Ibrahim Karori who introduced 'Pargana' system in Kamrup. The entire territory of Koch Hajo was divided into 'Sarkars' or districts namely the Sarkar of Kamrup comprising of Guwahati and Hajo. 'Sarkar Dekheri' or Uttarkul which administered over the territory lying north of the Brahmaputra, Sarkar Dakhinkol having jurisdiction over the territories lying to the south of the Brahmaputra and lastly Sarkar Bangalkhum.⁷

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² Swarna L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publication Pvt.Ltd. 2015), 7.

³ Mirza Nathan, *Fateha-i-Ibreyia or Tarikh-e-Aasham*, Translated and Edited by Asif Mazhar,(Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 2009),16.

⁴ Suryya K Bhuyan (ed.), *Kamrupar Buranji*, fourth edition, (Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 2015).12.

⁵ Edward A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1906).66.

⁶ Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, Translated by Moidul I. Borah, (Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1936).403-410.

⁷ Bhuyan, *Kamrupar*, 31,131.

This was followed by the establishment of Mughal political institutions resulting in the appointment and importation of Muslim personnels who later inhabited in Assam even after the termination of Ahom-Mughal contact in the 17th century.⁸ Further, for the purpose of realizing higher amount of revenues, the Mughals introduced the system of the classification of lands in Kamrup according to the nature of their produce. They were classified into three categories namely 'Kheraj' or taxed land which comprised of the ordinary and cultivating tenure, the 'Nisf Kheraj' or half assessed tenure and the 'La Kheraj' or revenue free tenure⁹. The Kheraj lands were further subdivided into the Palaj, Parauti chachar and Banjar. In addition to this, the Mughals also created a class of officers entrusted with the work of land assessment and revenue collection. Prominent among them were the 'Talukdars', 'Patwary' 'Choudhury', 'Thakuria', etc. These names are still prevalent amongst the local Assamese people and are widely used by many. Gadadhar Singha became acquainted with the Mughal system of land revenue and land survey. Hence, after ascending the Ahom throne after the battle of Itakhuli, he introduced a detailed land survey for the whole country and imported Mughal surveyors from Koch Behar and Bengal for the purpose of surveying the entire territory of the Ahom kingdom.¹⁰ Instead of abolishing the Pargana system in Kamrup (which came under the Ahom rule in the later part of the 17th century), the Ahoms instead assorted it with the Paik system in such a way that meets their administrative requirements.¹¹ Later, Kamrup came to be divided into 26 Parganas, each entrusted to the charge of an officer called 'Choudhury' who was assisted in revenue collection by several other officers such as Thakuria, Talukdar, Patgiri, Gaon Kakati on Kholar Kakati whose duty was to calculate the revenue paying Paiks and to assess the amount to be paid as revenue by them.¹² As a result of circumstances brought about by the recurring conflicts, the Ahom kings were forced to utilize the talents and services of the various war captives and other Muslim settlers in the region for intensifying the country's defence potential according to the need of the time.

Another significant aspect of the process of internal reorganization of the Ahoms was the appointment and employment of expert Muslim artisans and craftsmen to various responsible jobs by the Ahom monarchs. Rudra Singha, the Ahom ruler began to send envoys to different parts of the country for the purpose of gathering information about the social, cultural and political situations.¹³ Hence, it resulted in the inculcation of these social and cultural traits of the Mughals by the Assamese people.

Rudra Singha was also interested in cultural pursuits, hence, he was said to have invited many Muslim artisans and learned men from different parts of regions especially under Mughals to settle in Assam.¹⁴ Notable among these Muslim settlers were the royal engravers

⁸ Suryya K. Bhuyan (ed.), *Tungkhungia Buranji, fourth edition*, (Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 2012).17-18.

⁹ Swarna L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publication Pvt.Ltd. 2015), 411.

¹⁰ Gait, *History*, 170.

¹¹ Birinchi K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period), Vol I*, fourth edition, (Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 2003).90.

¹² Bhuyan, *Kamrupar*, 31.

¹³ Gait, *History*, 110.

¹⁴ Barua, *Assam*, 79.

or 'Akharkatiyas' who were engaged in the task of inscribing Royal Farmans or orders on metal sheets and stone slabs. The head of this branch was probably called a 'Barua'. There are still several Muslim families in Assam who claimed their descent from such Mughal nobles such as those of Julfikar Barua alias Bahadur Gaonburah who participated in the revolt of 1857 and exiled by the British to Kalapani.¹⁵

Similarly, the Muslims were also appointed to transcribe, interpret and decipher the Persian documents sent from capitals like Delhi and Dhaka to the Ahom rulers as well as to draft letters for the Ahom rulers to these foreign lands. These were known as the Persi Parhias or Persian transcribers.¹⁶ The Assamese Chronicles recorded that Pir Muhammad a Mughal Pir came to Assam along with Ajan Pir during the reign of Gadadhar Singha and settled in Sivsagar and was employed by the Ahom ruler for interpreting and translating Persian letters for the latter.

Because of the fair treatment meted by the Ahom rulers towards the Muslim population, these Muslim settlers of Assam were said to have displayed true love and patriotism for the country they adopted as their home. Therefore, they not only commanded the confidence of the Assamese royalty but they were also able to secure high positions in the Ahom state which thus inspired their descendants to accept the region as their home. It may be noted that many of these Muslims served in the royal arsenals of the Ahom kings. They were known as the 'Dadhora' or Armour bearers or bodyguards of the Ahom kings and nobles. The Assamese Chronicles mentioned about Rupai Dadhora who was an essential armour bearer of the Ahom king Gadadhar Singha.¹⁷

There were also many Muslim officials holding important posts in the civil and military departments comprising of the posts of Boras, Saikias or Hazarikas and also that of the Baruas. This gradual growth of the Muslim population in Assam and their employment in various governmental services by the Ahom rulers facilitated the assimilation of the non indigenous people with indigenous population of Assam.

Emperor Aurangzeb has always been portrayed as bigoted and orthodox ruler, who was known for his partial treatments towards hindus. As stated by Jadunath Sarkar, Aurangzeb followed the policy of temple destruction. Evidence of temple destruction includes the one from the Bundela capital where Aurangzeb had demolished the 'lofty and massive' temples of Bir Singh Bundela and erected a mosque in its place.¹⁸ However, contrary to this, there is an evidence recorded on the grant of certain lands given to Sudaman Brahmana and his son Kamdev (managers of the temple Umananda) by Emperor Aurangzeb. During the time when Pandu and Dakshinkul were two of Mughal Sarkars, the land of Umananda came under the

¹⁵ Suryya K.Bhuyan, *Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singha*, (Guwahati:Assam Prasasan Parishad, 1975), 93.

¹⁶ Bhuyan, *Swargadeo*, 166-167.

¹⁷ Bhuyan, *Swargadeo*,166.

¹⁸ Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzib, Based on Persian Sources, Vol-I, Reign of Shahjahan*,(Calcutta: M.C.Sarkar & Sons,1912), 29.

Mughals. And according to the document the Emperor gave land grant to the Temple of Umananda at Guwahati.¹⁹

Thus, despite having a brief period in the region, the Mughals managed to impact largely on the administrative system. Various changes have been found in different domains of the administration of Assam under Mughals which was continued even after the termination of Mughal rule in Assam.

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¹⁹ S.C.Goswami, *Readings in the History and Culture of Assam*, (Guwahati :Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti, 1984), 151-153.