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## *Paiks* System the backbone of Ahom Administration machinery: A Study

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**Abstract:** The *Paik* system, a unique form of labour and military organization developed under the Ahom rulers of Assam, played a pivotal role in shaping the socio-economic and political structures of medieval Assamese society. This study explores the origin, evolution, administrative framework, and multi-dimensional functions of the *Paik* system, highlighting how it served simultaneously as a labour force, revenue mechanism, and military foundation of the Ahom state. The paper examines the lived conditions of the *paik*, the hierarchy of officials, and the economic significance of state-allotted lands. The research also critically evaluates the exploitative aspects and inequalities inherent in the system, particularly the burden of compulsory labour and the rise of privileged categories such as *Chamua paik*. Further, the study analyzes internal weaknesses socio-political tensions, demographic pressures and external disruptions- such as the Moamoria rebellion and Burmese invasions- that contributed to the eventual decline of the system.

**Keywords:** Ahom Administration, Agriculture, Khel, *Paik*, Labour, Nobles.

### I. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of Ahom in Assam several significant changes took place in the polity, society, economy, agriculture practices. They introduced a new system of agriculture. With a view to establishing a well-organised administrative machinery they introduced *paik* system. The *paik* system occupies a central place in the administrative, economic, and military history of medieval Assam under the Ahom rulers. Introduced soon after the establishment of Ahom authority in the Brahmaputra Valley in 1228, it evolved into a highly structured mechanism of labour mobilization that sustained the state for nearly 600 years. The system assigned every adult male between 16 to 50 the duty of the dual responsibility of the state by contributing labour and serving in the militia during times of conflict. Organized into *khels* or functional guilds, the *paik* formed the core workforce that supported agriculture, public works, royal households, religious institutions, and military campaigns. State-allotted land, rotational labour service, and a strict hierarchy of officers characterized this system, making it both an administrative innovation and a crucial instrument for state consolidation. However, beneath its apparent efficiency lay deep structural inequalities, compulsory labour obligations, and social tensions that shaped the lives of ordinary people. Over time, demographic pressures, economic changes, aristocratic exploitation, widespread discontent- reflected in events such as the *Moamoria* rebellion- and external invasions exposed the vulnerabilities of this labour-dependent system. The introduction of British colonial rule and transition to a cash-based revenue economy marked its eventual demise. This paper examines the origin, functioning, socio-economic implications, and decline of the *paik* system, while evaluating its significance in understanding the broader historical development of Assam.

### 2. Methodology:

The study adopts a historical-analytical methodology, drawing primarily on qualitative research techniques to examine the evolution, structure and decline of the *paik* system in Assam. The study is based on extensive consultation of both primary and secondary data, including archival records, chronicles such as *Buranjis*, administrative documents, travelers' accounts, and contemporary reports. Secondary sources such as scholarly books, research articles and historical interpretations by noted historians are critically analyzed to construct an informed narrative.

### 3. Objectives of the Study:

This research is undertaken with the following specific aims and objectives:

1. To examine the historical evolution of the *paik* system in Assam.
2. To analyse the administrative structure of the *paik* system.
3. To explore the economic significance of the *paik* system.
4. To identify the factors that led to the decline and eventual abolition of the *paik* system.

#### 4.0 Ahom revenue Administration:

Prior to the rise of the Ahoms in the east and the Koches in the west, very little information is provided by the chronicles to know about the state of Assam. Assam has been mainly a rural-based agricultural country with land as the principal source of sustenance and production of the people. The people were broadly divided into two classes, viz.

- i. the landholders, comprising of princes, nobles and high-ranking officers favoured with large estates., and
- ii. the peasants, including small-artisans, slaves and labouring classes.

As the system of payment in cash to the officers was not usually in vogue, they were rewarded by generous land grants for their service. The system of allotting lands for services rendered to the State was usually followed by the Ahom kings. This system naturally produced three classes of people in the Ahom State, viz, (i) Princes, nobles or the land-endowment holders and officers, (ii) *Chamuas*, and (iii) ordinary *Kari Paik*.

##### 4.0.1 Paiks System:

The term '*Paik* or *Khel*' referred to every adult male subject between the ages of 16 to 50 under the Ahom administration. A unit called a got was formed, comprising four *paiks*. Each *paik* had to render his service to the state for a period of three months a year on a rotation basis. The cultivation or domestic work of the *paik* on duty was looked after by the other *paiks* of the got. However, during the time of state emergency, two or sometimes even three *Paiks* were recruited from a got. The evolution of the *paik* system seems to have been obscure. While the Buranjis aver that *paiks* came to Assam along with the first Ahom conqueror, Sukapha. The founder of the Ahom dynasty, Sukapha, entered Assam with 300 *paiks*, placed them under the Bargohain and Burhagohain and arranging them according to their services, organized them into *khels*. After several experimental stages, the *paik* system in its broad essentials seems to have been introduced into Assam by Ahom king Suklenmong (1539-52) by grafting one *paik* (*powa*) out of a unit of four for state service. It virtually remained in abeyance till it was recast and enforced by Momai Tamuli Barbarua. Feeling that his kingdom grown unprecedentedly large, needed reorganization, Pratap Singha directed him to conduct a census of the people and settle them systematically.

As there was no clear distinction between the civil and military departments, the same *paik* had to render duties pertaining to both 'for half the year' as might be necessary. The *paiks* were initially organized by the Barbarua into a unit or *got* of three *paiks* later revised to four. Every unit of four supplied the state with one man (called *mul*) as permanent militia. If necessary for public service, two (*dewal*) and in grave emergencies, either of war or public works, even three (*tewal*) would be requisitioned. The jointly-held fields would be cultivated and the domestic chores performed by the other three, two or one, as the case might be. Each had to serve in his respective calling for three months in a year by rotation. Thus, the non-serving *paik* had to render military service during emergencies as a standing militia and capable of being commanded by short notice mobilization through the *kheldars*. This dispensed with the need of keeping a vast army and also of a formal conscription. In return for the service rendered, each *paik* was granted two *puras* (each about 2 <sup>2/3</sup> acres) of rent-free *roopit* (*Sali*) rice land (*gamati* or body land). However, in case no personal service was required, the *paik* had to pay two rupees. Further, he got land without any limit as to extent and free of direct taxation for his house and garden (*barimati*) and paid a poll-tax or house tax of one rupee except in Darrang.

##### 4.0.2 Likchou:

The Ahom kings granted large tract of land, along with a substantial number of serving men (*Paik*) to members of the aristocracy. These *paiks*, assigned as perquisites to the landed nobility, were known as *likchou*. High-ranking officers not only received extensive estates but were also provided with *paiks* to cultivate these lands. Princes, nobles, senior officials, and religious institutions all relied on the services of these *likchou paiks*. Further they were subdivided as the *Bilatiya paiks* who worked as tenants on the private land estate of the nobles, the *Dewaliya paik* who were allotted to the temples and *Satras*. The *Bahatiya paik* who rendered service to their respective hill masters.

The *paik* allotted to officials during their term of office served as both labourers and attendants, functioning almost like slaves. In return for their manual service to the state and the nobility, they were given two *puras* of cultivable paddy land and homestead plots. These *likchou paik* were obligated to perform agricultural and domestic labour, and during times of war, they served as soldiers.

##### 4.0.3 Chamua:

*Paik* born into relatively affluent households were known as *Chamua*. They could secure exemption from personal state service by paying a commutation fee. This category generally included dispossessed Bhuyans or former landlords, members of the *Chutiya* nobility, traders, artisans, scribes, and similar groups. *Chamua* were often appointed to junior administrative posts such as *Bora*, *Saikia*, *Tamuli*, or *Pachani*. The system of paying commutation money thus led to the emergence of a new intermediary class that stood between the nobility and the peasantry.

#### 5.0 A critical overview on Paiks system:

Certain obligations were imposed upon the *paik* system. Several underlying issues and structural limitations of the system that are not sufficiently foregrounded.

First, although the *paik* is the 'backbone' of the state, this characterization masks the exploitative nature of compulsory labour. The system, while efficient for the ruling elite, significantly curtailed the autonomy of the ordinary people. Their inability to accumulate surplus, due largely to prolonged periods of state service, restricted both economic mobility and social advancement. The seemingly benevolent provision of tax-free paddy land must therefore be critically viewed as a calculated mechanism to sustain a dependent labour force rather than a measure of welfare.

Second, they did not have enough land beyond their requirement to produce surplus crops. Of course, they could reclaim unsurveyed land for the purpose of agriculture on a nominal charge; but having spent three to four months in the various services of the state, they had to engage themselves, for the remaining eight months tilling their own land granted by the state and managing their family affairs.

Third, *paik* system itself embedded inherent inequalities. The aristocracy, nobility, and higher offices benefitted materially from the surplus produced by *paik*, while *paik* themselves remained tied to subsistence-level existence. The system's reliance on compulsory forced service can be seen as a form of institutional coercion rather than voluntary public duty.

Fourth, there was no land revenue on the state-allotted paddy cultivation lands to the *Paik*. But each *paik* had to pay one rupee for the homestead and kitchen-garden. In Darrang a hearth-tax of the same amount was imposed on each family using a separate cooking place. In Nowgong such hearth-tax was called *Kharikatana*, any one reclaiming fallow land was allowed to enjoy it on payment of one rupee per *pura*. Artisans like goldsmiths, bell-metal workers, braziers, fishermen, silk-weavers were also required to pay rupees two to three annually.

Finally, it is considered that the *paik* system primarily as a functional institution beneficial to state formation, but it does not adequately consider its contribution to long term socio-economic stagnation. By preventing accumulation of surplus and restricting economic diversification, the *paik* system may have inhibited the development of a dynamic peasantry and a robust internal market-factors that arguably contributed to the eventual decline of the Ahom state.

## 6.0 Abolition of the *paiks* system:

The decline of the *paik* system in Assam resulted from a combination of socio-economic, political, and administrative factors which gradually weakened its foundations. The excessive burden of compulsory labour to the king, nobles, and religious institutions left *paiks* with limited time for cultivating their own land. This system not only reducing their productivity but creating widespread dissatisfaction also. Growth of population and increasing pressure on cultivable land further strained the system. At the same time the rise of *chamua paiks*- wealthier individuals who could buy exemption from service- introduced inequality and corruption, caused shifting the workload onto poorer *paik*. The growing power of nobles and officers, who controlled large private estates with attached *paik*, weakened central authority and fragmented the system. During the later part of Ahom rule, political instability and administrative decay particularly exposed by the Moamoria rebellion, undermined the state's ability to regulate *paiks* labour effectively. Repeated Burmese invasions (1817-1826) caused the political turmoil and devastated the population base, making the traditional labour structure impracticable. With the arrival of the British and introduction of cash-based revenue systems after the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), the labour-oriented *paiks* system became obsolete. Changing nature of warfare, new system of economic transition which required professional rather than rotational militia forces, rendered the *paik* system increasingly inefficient and ultimately led to its abolition.

## 7.0 Conclusion:

The *paik* system formed the backbone of the Ahom state for nearly six centuries, shaping its administrative efficiency, economic productivity, and military strength. Designed as a comprehensive framework of labour mobilization, it enabled the Ahoms to consolidate political authority, develop agriculture, construct public infrastructure, and maintain a formidable militia drawn from the common population. While the system demonstrated remarkable organizational skill and adaptability in its early phases, its inherent dependence on compulsory labour and its rigid hierarchical structure gradually exposed deep socio-economic vulnerabilities. Over time, inequalities widened as privileged groups like the *Chamua* and *likchou paiks* emerged, while ordinary *paiks* bore increasing burden of service. Political instability, corruption within the *paik*-officer hierarchy, demographic pressures, and aristocratic exploitation further weakened the system from within. The Moamoria rebellion and repeated Burmese invasions severely disrupted its manpower base, hastening its collapse. With the advent of British colonial rule and the shift toward a monetized revenue economy, the traditional labour-based system became obsolete and was formally abolished.

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