



TRANSFORMATION OF PROFESSIONAL CLASSES DURING THE DECLINE OF THE AHOM DYNASTY IN THE 18TH–19TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT :

The 18th and early 19th centuries marked a period of intense political, economic, and social transformation in Assam as the Ahom dynasty entered a phase of decline. This paper investigates how the professional classes—once integral to the stability and functioning of the Ahom state—underwent significant changes during this turbulent era (Barpujari, 1992; Bhuyan, 1930). The professional classes, including administrative officers (Phukans, Baruas), artisans, scribes, healers, and diplomatic functionaries (such as the Katakis), were embedded within the Paik system and functioned under royal patronage (Gait, 1906). However, the gradual weakening of centralized authority, repeated invasions (such as those by the Burmese), internal succession conflicts, and growing British interference disrupted the socio-administrative fabric (Bhuyan, 1957; Guha, 1983). These upheavals led to the weakening of the Paik system and the decentralization of professional roles. As a result, many state-supported professionals either lost their official functions or adapted by integrating into emerging colonial and local economies (Guha, 1977). This study traces the shifts in their socio-economic roles, loss of status, or transformation into hereditary or marginalized occupational groups. Using historical chronicles (Buranjis), colonial records, and scholarly interpretations, the paper shows how the decline of the Ahom dynasty did not just signify the fall of a political power, but also a fundamental restructuring of Assamese society—particularly its professional hierarchy (Saikia, 2004).

Keywords: : Ahom decline, Professional classes, Paik system, Social transformation, Colonial impact .

I.Introduction:

The Ahom dynasty, which ruled Assam for nearly six centuries (1228–1826 CE), was supported by a well-structured administrative and occupational hierarchy (Gait, 1906).



Professional classes such as Phukans, Baruas, Katakis, artisans, scribes, and healers formed the backbone of the Ahom governance system, operating through the Paik system and royal patronage (Bhuyan, 1930). However, during the 18th and early 19th centuries, this structure began to weaken due to internal political instability, repeated Burmese invasions, and eventual British intervention (Barpujari, 1992). The decline of central authority disrupted the existing socio-administrative order, leading to significant shifts in the roles, status, and livelihoods of these professional groups (Guha, 1983). Many were either absorbed into the emerging colonial bureaucracy, reduced to hereditary caste-based roles, or marginalized (Saikia, 2004). This paper explores how the decline of the Ahom dynasty led to the transformation of professional classes, examining the socio-political forces that reshaped their identities and contributions to Assamese society during a critical transitional period.

II. Objectives of the Study: The main objectives in this paper is to-

- 1] To examine the impact of the decline of the Ahom dynasty on traditional professional classes, particularly those dependent on the Paik system, such as artisans, soldiers, and cultivators.
- 2] To analyse the socio-economic and political factors—including Burmese invasions and British colonial policies—that led to the restructuring of occupational roles and the emergence of new professional identities.
- 3] To explore the processes of adaptation, decline, or transformation among various professional groups during the 18th–19th centuries, highlighting changes in class structure, labour organization, and social mobility in Assam during this transitional period.

III . Methodology:

This study adopts a historical-analytical methodology to investigate the transformation of professional classes during the decline of the Ahom dynasty in the 18th–19th centuries. Primary sources such as Buranjis (Ahom chronicles), royal edicts, land records, and colonial administrative reports will be critically examined to trace changes in occupational structures and the functioning of the Paik system. Archival research will be conducted at institutions such as the Assam State Archives and National Archives of India to gather relevant documents.



Secondary sources, including scholarly books, journal articles, and theses by historians like S.K. Bhuyan, H.K. Barpujari, Amalendu Guha, and Yasmin Saikia, will be reviewed to understand existing interpretations and debates. A comparative analysis will be employed to assess the shifts in professional roles before, during, and after the decline of the Ahom dynasty.

The study will also utilize a socio-economic point of view to understand class transformation by examining patterns of labour redistribution, loss of state patronage, and the rise of new professions under colonial influence. Where available, oral histories and local folklore will supplement written records to capture indigenous perspectives. This multi-source, interdisciplinary approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex transitions experienced by professional classes during this period of upheaval.

IV. Analysis and Discussion:

The decline of the Ahom dynasty in the 18th–19th centuries was a critical turning point in Assam’s socio-political and economic history (Barpujari, 1992). This period, marked by internal instability, external invasions, and colonial intervention, brought about significant changes in the traditional structure of society (Bhuyan, 1957). One of the most affected segments was the professional classes—comprising artisans, cultivators, soldiers, scribes, priests, and other occupational groups who formed the backbone of the Ahom state machinery (Gait, 1906). This topic seeks to explore how these classes transformed during the transitional phase from a powerful indigenous monarchy to a region under British colonial control (Guha, 1983).

Under the Ahom rule (1228–1826), the socio-economic structure was largely organized through the Paik system, a form of corvée labor where adult males were obligated to offer military or public service in exchange for land and protection (Bhuyan, 1930). Different professions were hereditary and linked to specific service roles, ensuring a stable structure of administration, agriculture, and artisanal production. However, by the mid-18th century, the Ahom state began to weaken due to internal succession conflicts, growing inefficiencies in governance, and external threats such as the Moamoria Rebellion and repeated Burmese invasions (Barpujari, 1992).



These disruptions weakened the administrative machinery and dislocated the traditional occupational groups (Guha, 1983). Many Paiks abandoned their duties due to exploitation, overburdening, or loss of state support. Artisans and professionals who once served the royal court or military apparatus were either forced to shift to agriculture or migrate (Saikia, 2004). The weakening of royal patronage also led to the decline of temple-based professions and crafts (Bhuyan, 1957).

With the advent of British colonialism after the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, Assam was integrated into the larger colonial economy (Guha, 1977). This brought about a redefinition of professions. The British dismantled the Paik system and introduced new land revenue systems (Barpujari, 1992), a cash economy, and Western-style education (Saikia, 2004). These reforms favored the emergence of new professional groups, such as clerks, teachers, interpreters, and petty officials, many of whom came from middle-caste or marginalized backgrounds that had limited access to power during the Ahom period (Guha, 1983).

At the same time, traditional artisan groups suffered due to the influx of machine-made goods and changing market demands (Guha, 1977). While some adapted by integrating into the new economy, others faced impoverishment or loss of status. The colonial preference for administrative and clerical roles also created an aspirational middle class, further altering the traditional class dynamics (Saikia, 2004).

This transformation was not merely a process of decline but also one of restructuring and adaptation (Barpujari, 1992). Communities redefined their roles in response to shifting political authority and economic conditions. The emergence of new identities, increased social mobility for some, and marginalization for others reflect the complex outcomes of this historical transition (Guha, 1983).

Studying this transformation provides valuable insight into how social classes respond to large-scale political change. It also highlights the resilience and adaptability of local communities in the face of both imperial collapse and colonial consolidation. This topic thus contributes to a deeper understanding of Assam's historical evolution and the broader processes of social change in pre-colonial and colonial India.



V. Conclusion:

The decline of the Ahom dynasty in the 18th–19th centuries marked a profound transformation in Assam's professional and social structure. The disintegration of the Paik system, political instability, and colonial intervention led to the erosion of traditional occupations and the emergence of new professional identities. While many hereditary roles declined due to the loss of royal patronage and economic shifts, new opportunities arose under British rule, reshaping class dynamics. This period was not only one of decline but also of adaptation and realignment, reflecting the resilience of Assamese society in navigating historical transitions and socio-economic changes during a time of upheaval.

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