

The Paik System in Ahom Society: A Socio-Economic Study


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In the early 13th century, the Tai-Shan people, ancestors of the Ahoms, entered the eastern Brahmaputra Valley from Upper Burma and Yunnan. They ruled Assam for more than 600 years, establishing a strong kingdom through effective governance with cultural assimilation. Central to their administrative and socio-economic structure was the Paik system - an indigenous labour and military framework that enabled the Ahoms to mobilize manpower for both civil and military purposes. This paper explores how the system influenced the lives of ordinary people through collective labour, land distribution, and shared responsibilities. It examines the internal organization of paiks into units such as gots and khels, and their classification into Chamua, Kanri, and professional khels, highlighting the embedded social hierarchy, privilege or restrictions. The relationship between the state and the paiks is analysed in terms of land rights, mobility, and influence over local officials. While the system fostered community cohesion, interdependence, and a sense of unity, it also imposed constraints on personal economic freedom and social mobility, revealing a structure marked by both solidarity and stratification.

Keywords: paik system, khel structure, social status, social cohesion, service obligations

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1. Introduction

The Ahoms, a *Tai*-speaking people, migrated from present-day Yunnan in China and established a powerful and enduring kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam during the early 13th century under the leadership of Sukapha. After his arrival in 1228 CE and the subsequent foundation of the Ahom polity, the *Paik* system was established as a foundational administrative institution that underpinned the kingdom's governance and economy for nearly six centuries. This system, based on forced labour and military conscription, was instrumental in consolidating Ahom authority and integrating local tribal populations. Evolving through complex interactions with indigenous communities of southeastern regions of the Brahmaputra Valley, the *Paik* system came to define the socio-political framework of the Ahom. It organized adult males, known as *paiks*, into basic units called *gots*, each comprising four men, and into larger occupational groups known as *khels*. In exchange for their service, *paiks* were granted land and certain privileges. Over time, the assimilation of various indigenous communities into their structure fostered a unique socio-political order that sustained Ahom rule for centuries. (Bhuyan S. K., 1985, p. 153)

This study is based on the *Buranji* records preserved by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, which investigates the impact of the system on the everyday lives of common people, focusing on collective labour, the allocation of land, and the distribution of communal responsibilities. It delves into the internal structuring of the *paik* workforce, organized into groups like *gots* and *khels*, and further categorized into *Chamua*, *Kanri*, and occupational *khels* by reflecting underlying social hierarchies, entitlements, and limitations. The dynamics between the state and the *paiks* are examined through the lens of land tenure, mobility, and their interactions with local authorities. The paper aims to show how the system, while nurturing mutual dependence, social cohesion, and a collective identity, also restricted individual economic choices and upward mobility, thus exposing a socio-economic framework characterized by both cooperation and inequality. This paper highlights the systematic organization of adult males into *khels*, each designated for specific state services such as

arrow-making or boat-building. These units were administered by officials like *Phukans*, *Rajkhowas*, and *Baruas*, with further subdivisions under the command of *Hazarikas*, *Saikias*, and *Boras*. Typically, one *paik* from each *got* served the state for three-month term while others managed agricultural responsibilities; in times of emergency more *paiks* could be conscripted. Higher-ranking *Chamuas* were generally exempt from personal service. The *Buranji* thus reveals a hierarchically structured socio-economic order governed by labour, service obligations, and state authority.

Several scholars have examined the *Paik* system from varying perspectives, focusing on its administrative design, economic functions, and role in state formation. In *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, S.L. Baruah presents the *Paik* system as a rigid, state-directed mechanism that incorporated tribal communities into mandatory service, though she gives limited attention to its impact on personal liberty social advancement. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan's *Studies in the History of Assam* offers a detailed account of how *paiks* were organized for civic and military duties, yet does not fully explore the broader socio-cultural consequences of such mobilization. Jahnabi Gogoi, in *Agrarian System of Medieval Assam*, analyses the caste and class dimensions of the system, noting the *paiks'* semi-servile condition, landholding arrangements, and responsibilities to the state. However, her study understates the everyday experiences, resistance strategies, and micro-level negotiations that shaped *paik* life. This research seeks to address these historical omissions by offering a more nuanced interpretation of the *Paik* system as both an instrument of state control and a site of complex social interaction.

2. Structure of the Paik System

The *Paik* system under the Ahom administration was a highly organized institution that integrated military, agrarian, and artisanal labour through a structured hierarchy and a system of rotational service. Each *got* – a unit of four adult males – functioned on a rotation basis. Typically, one *paik* served the state for three months annually, later extended to four months during the reign of Rudra Singha (1696-1714 CE), while the others managed his domestic and agricultural duties. In times of emergency, two or all three of the remaining *paiks* from a *got* could be summoned for service. (Baruah, 1986, pp. 393-394)

Paiks were classified into two main categories: *Chamua* and *Kanri*. (Guha, 1991, p. 52) *Chamua paiks*, of higher status, were generally exempt from personal service (Bhuyan S., 1933, p. xxix) and performed specialized or administrative functions. Many *Chamua khels*, especially those of farmers or artisans, resembled occupational guilds. In contrast, the *Kanri paiks*, who made up the majority of the peasantry, were subject to manual service but retained rights over their homesteads and agricultural land. Though not legally tied to a fixed location, they were bound to state service. Notably, *Kanri paiks* enjoyed certain privileges, including the right to cultivate a portion of the *khel* land and to collectively petition for the removal of unpopular officers. (Guha, 1991, p. 52)

The Ahom administration maintained a tight chain of command over the *paik* population. A *Bora* oversaw twenty *paiks*, a *Saikia* one hundred, a *Hazarika* one thousand, and a *Phukan* governed six thousand. Larger *khels*, such as those of boat-builders, were under managed by *Phukans* (e.g., *Naosaliya Phukan*), while smaller ones, like the bowmakers came under *Baruas* (e.g., *Dhenu-chocha Barua*). *Rajkhowas*, a distinct category of officers, were placed in charge of defined territories and could exercise judicial powers over a maximum of three thousand *paiks*. (Baruah, 1986, pp. 393-394) These officials were allotted rent-free lands, cultivated by the *paiks* under their jurisdiction, and they received gifts from the subordinates and junior officers. (Hamilton, 1940, p. 23)

This administrative structure fostered social cohesion. Members of a *got*, often not related by blood, supported each other by tending to each other's households and agricultural work during state service. Upon returning, *paiks* shared information about the state, thereby promoting knowledge exchange and reinforcing community bonds. (Rajguru, 1988, p. 239)

3. Khel System

The *khel* system, integral to the Ahom revenue administration, required all able-bodied men to perform personal service in return for land grants. Each *paik* was allotted a share of *ga-mati*-two *puras* (1 *pura* = 1 ¼ acres) of *rupit* or cultivable land. Initially, *khels* were organized by profession or craft, but during the reign of Chakradhavaj Singha (1663-1669 A.D.) they expanded to include diverse occupational groups.

These *khels* evolved into self-sufficient units, sourcing most needs internally, and began to be organized not only by trade but also by territory and economic considerations. (Goswami, 1986, p. 18)

Land was assigned not to individuals but to the *got* (group of four) as a collective. Ownership under the Ahom system implied both usage rights and permanent association of *paiks* with their land, reinforcing the concept of land and cultivators as state property. Even if the entire tract of land was moved from one authority to another, the *paiks* cultivating that land remained inseparable from their holdings (*ga-mati*) and were transferred along with it. (Goswami, 1986, pp. 31-32)

Revenue assessment varied by *khel* type. Professional *khels* engaged in specialized extraction or craftsmanship-such as those producing salt, gold, iron, or silver-were taxed more heavily than agricultural *paiks*. These professional *khels* enjoyed greater economic status than their agrarian counterparts. (Goswami, 1986, p. 49) In return for their service, each *khel* was granted revenue-free land for paddy cultivation. The strength and size of the *khel* were proportional to the significance of the service it provided to the state. (Sarma S., 1989, p. 95)

4. Position of the Paiks

The *paiks* were physically capable individuals enlisted to provide a wide range of specialized services to the state, including construction, manuscript writing, crafting arrows and boats, military duties, and the supervision of elephants, horses, hawks, forests, and tax collection. (Bhuyan S., 1933, p. xxix) Prior to formal induction, boys aged between twelve and sixteen underwent structured training designed to prepare them for both civil and military roles within the *paik* system. This preparatory phase aimed to equip them with the necessary skills for state service, whether in artisanal or administrative capacities.

Young trainees at this stage were known as *Chengra Paiks*, a term denoting both their age group (twelve to sixteen) and transitional status. Members of the *Sonari Khel* (guild of goldsmiths) began mastering their craft early in life, while future *Chamuas*-a rank above ordinary *paiks*-were required to develop specialized skills before formal recognition. (Goswami, 1986, p. 56)

The status of ordinary *paiks* was significantly lower than that of those in professional *khels* or artisan groups. While professional *khel* members often retained a degree of independence even after fulfilling their obligations, ordinary *paiks* functioned as temporary state employees under direct administrative control. Though they could hold minor official posts, they lacked the autonomy and privileges afforded to skilled artisan.

A clear promotional hierarchy existed within the *paik* system. Individuals who demonstrated merit and improvement could be promoted: a *paik* could become a *Kari*, and a *Kari* could be elevated to a *Chamua*. *Kari paiks*, who held specific roles, were sometimes exempt from manual labour and could be reassigned from their original *khels* into the *Chamuas*. These promotions required formal recognition, often by the monarch. A *Kari's* elevation was only complete when his name was officially transferred from the *Kari* to the *Chamua* register; without this administrative change, he remained a *Kari*. (Goswami, 1986, pp. 59-60)

5. The Socio-Economic Condition of the Paiks

Among the earliest communities to fall under Ahom rule were the *Morans* and the *Barahis*, tribal groups engaged in subsistence production based on collective land ownership, hunting, fishing, and forest gathering. These groups lacked centralized political structures. (Baruah, 1986, p. 391) The Ahoms *Sali kheti*, a wet rice cultivation method far more efficient than the existing shifting cultivation practices. This agricultural shift boosted productivity and enabled surplus generation, which was crucial for state consolidation and administrative growth. To harness these gains, the Ahoms established tributary relationships with the subjugated tribes—sometimes through negotiation and assimilation but often through coercion and warfare, reducing indigenous communities to a semi-servile status. As part of this evolving structure, Sukapha institutionalized compulsory personal service, requiring tribal members to provide essential goods and services such as food, water, fuel, and produce to the ruling elite. This practice formed the precursor to the *Paik* system. (Baruah, 1986, p. 391)

The *Paik* system, instituted by the Ahom administration, served as both a mechanism for labour mobilization and tool for agrarian control. Each *paik* was granted a plot of cultivable land in exchange for compulsory service to the state, which significantly reduced landlessness and ensured basic subsistence. Although bound to provide manual labour and fulfil administrative duties akin to those of a bondsman, the *paik* retained a limited degree of agency. He could challenge or demand the removal of immediate superiors—*Baras*, *Saikias*, and, in certain cases, even *Hazarikas*. In later periods, this right extended to include high-ranking *Gohains*, suggesting that *paiks* were not mere subjects but held constrained political rights. As E.A. Gait observes, this provision functioned as an essential safeguard against arbitrary abuse by officials.

Nevertheless, the existence of these rights did not eliminate systemic corruption. Officials frequently demanded bribes from *paiks*—either in the form of extra labour or produce, extending even to the roots, fruits, and vegetables collected from their land. While some kings took disciplinary action against corrupt officers based on popular grievances, such responses became infrequent as the Ahom state weakened. By the end of the monarchy, corruption and extortion had become widespread, promoting complaints not just against local authorities but also against member of the aristocracy. These growing injustices coincided with an unpopular extension of the *paik's* compulsory service from three to four months annually, further deepening peasant discontent.

The oppressive nature of the system was aggravated by fiscal burdens. Previously rent-free homestead lands were subjected to poll taxes, exacerbating the economic strain on *paiks*. While the *khel* system helped organize occupational groups, it failed to facilitate the formation of autonomous commercial guilds. *Paiks* were confined to their designated *khels* and regions, severely restricting their mobility and participation in broader economic activities. This lack of flexibility stifled both economic advancement and social mobility. The structure of their obligations left minimal surplus, ensuring a subsistence-level existence with limited autonomy or innovation. Their lifestyle and economic roles were effectively state-determined.

In essence, the *Paik* system resembled institutionalized serfdom. While it included certain legal safeguards and participatory provisions, its structural rigidity, economic exploitation, and restrictions on personal freedom reinforced the *paik's* subordinate position within the socio-political framework of medieval Assam. (Gogoi J., 2002, pp. 123-124)

6. Conclusion

The *Paik* system formed the backbone of the Ahom state's socio-economic and administrative organization, creating a disciplined labour force that served in both civil and military capacities. *Paiks* were divided into various categories-such as *Chamuas*, *Kanris*, and members of professional *khels*-each performing specialized roles essential to state functions. While all *paiks* were bound by compulsory service, they were also granted certain privileges, including allotments of land for subsistence, the right to appeal against oppressive officials, and the possibility of promotion based on merit. However, these rights operated within a rigid framework that limited economic freedom and mobility. Professional *khels* often enjoy relative autonomy and higher status, whereas ordinary *paiks* remained closely tied to the state, their lives governed by regulations that left minimal chance for upward movement. This system fostered a sense of interdependence and collective responsibility, yet it also reinforced a strict social hierarchy and economic stagnation. Ultimately, the dual nature of the *Paik* system-offering both structural privileges and systemic constraints-defined the lived experience of the *paiks*, who, while integral to state functioning, remained subordinate within the broader socio-political order.

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