



# Economic Policies of the Ahom Dynasty: A Historical Perspective

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## **ABSTRACT:**

The Ahom dynasty's (1228-1826) economic policies played a key role in shaping the medieval economy of Assam through well-structured agrarian systems, taxation, trade, and labour management. The backbone of the economy is agriculture, particularly wet rice production, supported by state-controlled land distribution and irrigation projects. The unique feature was the 'Paik System', which acted as both a labor force and a tax mechanism, ensuring economic productivity and military supply. Revenue collection was based primarily on land and labor, and trade in key commodities such as silk, betel nut, and rice flourished through internal and external networks. The state also supported crafts and industries such as weaving, metalwork and shipbuilding, which contributed to the country's economic self-sufficiency. This study examines the main economic policies of the Ahom dynasty and analyses their impact on governance, sustainability and long-term economic development. By examining historical records, inscriptions and academic research, it provides insight into the economic strategies of the dynasty and their relevance in the historical and contemporary context.

**Keywords:** Ahom Dynasty, Economic System, Agrarian Economy, Paik System, Taxation, Trade Networks, Revenue Collection, Labor Organization, Handicrafts, Industries, Economic Sustainability, Governance, Medieval Assam.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 History of the Ahom Dynasty**

The Ahom Dynasty ruled Assam from 1228 to 1826, marking one of the longest-reigning dynasties in Indian history. Founded by Sukapha, a Tai prince from present-day Yunnan (China), the Ahoms established a strong administrative and military system that enabled them to expand and consolidate their territory. Over centuries, they successfully resisted external invasions, including multiple Mughal incursions, while assimilating local

cultures and traditions. Their rule laid the foundation for a stable and organized governance system that influenced Assam's historical and economic landscape. (Guha, 1983)

## 2.2 Economic Foundations and Administrative Structure

Economic stability was central to the Ahom administration, with a well-organized agrarian system, labour management, and revenue policies ensuring sustainability. Agriculture, particularly wet rice cultivation, was the backbone of the economy, supported by state-controlled land distribution and irrigation infrastructure. The *Paik System*, a unique labour-based taxation model, provided manpower for agriculture, military service, and public works. Revenue collection was structured around land taxes and labour contributions, ensuring a steady flow of resources for governance. Trade flourished, both internally and externally, with commodities such as silk, betel nuts, and rice being key exports. Additionally, state-sponsored industries, including weaving, metalwork, and shipbuilding, played a vital role in economic self-sufficiency. (Sarma, 2024)

## 2.3 Importance of Studying Ahom Economic Policies

The Ahom Dynasty's economic policies were instrumental in sustaining its long rule and ensuring resilience against economic and military challenges. Studying these policies offers valuable insights into historical governance models, sustainable resource management, and economic self-sufficiency. The *Paik System*, in particular, serves as an early example of labour taxation and workforce distribution. Additionally, the Ahom approach to trade, taxation, and industrial promotion provides historical lessons applicable to modern economic governance. This study, based on historical records, inscriptions, and scholarly research, aims to analyse the Ahom economic structure and its long-term impact on Assam's socio-economic development.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To analyse the economic structure of the Ahom Dynasty.
- To identify economic challenges and reforms.
- To compare Ahom economic policies with contemporary kingdoms.
- To evaluate the long-term economic legacy of the Ahom's.

## 3. METHODOLOGIES

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach by analysing historical texts, inscriptions, and secondary scholarly sources to understand the economic structure of the Ahom Dynasty. Primary sources such as the *Buranjis* and archaeological findings will be examined to assess taxation, labour systems, and trade regulations. Economic challenges and reforms will be identified through historical records, focusing on the impact of wars, invasions, and policy adaptations. A comparative analysis with contemporary kingdoms like the Mughals and the Koch dynasty will highlight similarities and differences in economic strategies. Finally, the study will evaluate

the long-term economic legacy of the Ahom's by assessing their influence on later governance models and Assam's economic history.

#### 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will explore key aspects of the Ahom Dynasty's economic policies. The following sections outline the core areas of review:

- **Economic Framework of the Ahom Dynasty**
- **Economic Challenges and Policy Reforms**
- **Comparative Analysis of Ahom Economic Policies**
- **Long-Term Economic Legacy of Ahom**

##### I. ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK OF THE AHOM DYNASTY

- *Nath (2005)* explores the economic structure of Assam on the eve of British colonization, highlighting its agriculture-based economy, labour shortages, and barter system, which closely align with the economic framework of the Ahom Dynasty. The study emphasizes the role of state-controlled land distribution and irrigation, similar to the Ahom administration's management of wet rice cultivation. The Paik System, a distinctive labour and taxation model under Ahom rule, finds parallels in the pre-colonial economic organization described by Nath, where land tenure was communal, and cultivators had limited private ownership. Additionally, the study underscores Assam's limited trade networks and economic self-sufficiency, reflecting the controlled internal and external trade under the Ahoms. While Nath focuses on the colonial transition, his analysis provides insights into the foundational economic structures established during the Ahom era, particularly in terms of land use, taxation, and resource management.
- *Kalita (2020)* explores the economic structure of the Ahom Kingdom, highlighting the crucial role of the Paik system in sustaining agriculture, crafts, and industries. The Ahoms introduced wet-rice cultivation, significantly boosting agrarian output through the cultivation of Sali, Ahu, and Bao rice varieties. Land was categorized into rupit (cultivated), pharingati (temporary fallow), dalani (marshy), and habi (forested) to optimize agricultural productivity. The Paik system, formally organized under Pratap Singha and Momai Tamuli Barbarua, ensured labor distribution by assigning paiks to military, agrarian, and industrial tasks. Kalita (2020) highlights that specialized khels (guilds) flourished in weaving, metal casting, iron smelting, and oil pressing, with craft hubs like Sualkuchi and Ramdia strategically developed for efficiency. While the system facilitated economic self-sufficiency, over time, administrative complexities arose, with instances of

false Dewaliya claims to evade obligations. Despite these challenges, Kalita (2020) asserts that the Paik system and agricultural advancements ensured economic stability and longevity, contributing to the Ahoms' 600-year rule.

## II. ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK OF THE AHOM DYNASTY

- **Mohan (2017)** studied the Paik system as a crucial administrative mechanism in the Ahom kingdom, balancing labour and military needs. The system initially functioned through a rotational workforce, where every fourth Paik served in the military while others contributed to agriculture and infrastructure. Over time, reforms were introduced to address labour shortages and enhance military efficiency. Pratap Singha implemented Ghora Paiks (cavalry units) and Haluwa Paiks (permanent agricultural workers), while Rudra Singha restructured land policies to optimize resource allocation. The introduction of Dewaliya status (exemptions) attempted to prevent system abuse but ultimately led to inefficiencies. Mohan (2017) highlights that while these reforms temporarily strengthened the administrative framework, growing corruption and military pressures led to the system's decline, marking a significant shift in Ahom governance.
- **Sarma, G.D., Bharadwaj, P. (2024)** explores the economic challenges faced by Assam under the Ahom Dynasty and colonial rule, emphasizing the need for reforms to sustain economic stability. The Ahom administration relied on the Paik system, which, while effective in mobilizing labor for agricultural and military needs, required periodic restructuring to address inefficiencies and socio-economic disparities. Reforms in taxation and labor distribution were implemented to enhance economic productivity and governance. However, the colonial period introduced exploitative economic policies that prioritized revenue extraction over local welfare, leading to economic distress and structural imbalances. The study underscores the long-term impact of these economic transformations and advocates for policies that balance historical resilience with contemporary economic development.

## III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF AHOM ECONOMIC POLICIES

- **Roshangar, Akbari, and Samimi (2024)** conduct a comprehensive analysis of the Mughal Empire's administrative and economic systems, focusing on governance and revenue policies. They highlight the sophisticated governance structures established during the reigns of emperors such as Babur, Humayun, Akbar, and Aurangzeb.

The study emphasizes Akbar's significant reforms in land revenue systems, which aimed to provide uniformity and economic stability, thereby sustaining the empire's prosperity. The authors also discuss the dual strategies of 'JahanBani' (state maintenance) and 'Jahangiri' (imperial expansion) as elucidated by historian Abul-Fazl Ibn Mubarak, reflecting the Mughals' approach to governance.

- **Rajkumari (2019)** examines the trade relations between the Ahom kingdom and neighbouring hill tribes, highlighting the establishment of markets such as Kacharihat and Nagahat, which facilitated exchanges between the Ahoms and tribes like the Kacharis and Nagas. The Ahom administration implemented measures to regulate these interactions, including the appointment of officials to oversee trade and the collection of duties, thereby integrating frontier regions into the state's economic framework.

#### IV. LONG-TERM ECONOMIC LEGACY OF AHOM

- **Kalita (2020)** examines the economic policies of the Ahom kingdom, emphasizing the Paik system as a crucial administrative and economic framework that influenced later governance in Assam. The systematic organization of labour through the Paik and Khel systems not only ensured economic self-sufficiency during the Ahom rule but also laid the foundation for administrative structures in subsequent regimes. Kalita highlights how the Ahoms' emphasis on wet rice cultivation, craft industries, and revenue-free land allotment contributed to a sustainable economy, elements of which were later adapted in Assamese governance. The rotational labour system, taxation policies, and resource management strategies introduced by the Ahoms continued to shape administrative and economic approaches in Assam long after their rule.
- **Sarma (2024)** analyzed the economic evolution of Assam by comparing the Ahom Dynasty's self-sufficient economy with the colonial extraction-based model. The study highlighted that the Ahoms focused on agrarian sustainability, decentralized governance, and indigenous industries, whereas British colonial rule prioritized resource extraction, revenue maximization, and infrastructural development to serve imperial interests.

Sarma further discussed how the Ahoms' irrigation and taxation systems ensured economic equity, contrasting with the exploitative land revenue policies introduced by the British, which led to widespread agrarian distress. The research also examined the long-term economic consequences of both regimes, emphasizing that while the Ahoms promoted internal trade and artisanal industries, colonial policies redirected Assam's economy toward cash crops and raw material exports, marginalizing local enterprises.

### 5. FINDINGS

#### I. Economic Structure of the Ahom Dynasty

- The Ahom economy was primarily agrarian, with wet rice cultivation as the backbone.
- The Paik system ensured an organized labour force for agriculture, military, and administrative duties.
- Artisanal industries, including weaving, metalwork, and oil pressing, thrived under state patronage.

## II. Economic Challenges and Reforms

- The Paik system faced inefficiencies over time, leading to administrative complexities and corruption.
- Periodic reforms, such as the introduction of Ghora Paiks (cavalry units) and Haluwa Paiks (permanent agricultural workers), were implemented to optimize resource management.
- The Ahom administration attempted taxation reforms to maintain revenue without burdening cultivators.

## III. Comparative Analysis of Ahom Economic Policies

- Unlike the Mughal Empire, which relied on centralized taxation and commercial expansion, the Ahoms emphasized economic self-sufficiency and decentralized governance.
- The Kachari Kingdom had a revenue system based on land fertility, while the Ahoms used a more structured Paik-based taxation and labour system.
- The Ahoms focused on internal trade regulation, whereas other contemporary kingdoms, such as the Mughals and Rajputs, were more engaged in large-scale commercial and export-driven economies.

## IV. Long-Term Economic Legacy of the Ahoms

- The Paik system and Khel-based labour distribution influenced later governance models in Assam.
- Unlike the British colonial economic model, which focused on resource extraction and commercialization, the Ahom system promoted local industries, self-sufficiency, and agrarian stability.
- Many Ahom taxation and land-use policies were adapted in later Assamese governance, although weakened by colonial interventions.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The economic structure of the Ahom Dynasty was deeply rooted in an agrarian-based economy, supported by the Paik system, state-controlled land management, and regulated trade networks. The Ahoms effectively utilized a decentralized economic model that ensured self-sufficiency while maintaining administrative control over resources. Their taxation and revenue policies contributed to a sustainable economic framework, making the dynasty one of the longest-ruling in Indian history.

Despite its strengths, the Ahom economy faced several challenges, including labour shortages, inefficiencies in the Paik system, and increasing administrative complexities. Reforms were introduced by rulers such as Pratap Singha and Rudra Singha, who reorganized labour distribution, introduced new agricultural policies, and

attempted to address systemic inefficiencies. However, external pressures, including invasions and the later colonial intervention, led to disruptions in the Ahom economic model.

A comparative analysis highlights the differences and similarities between the Ahom economic policies and those of contemporary kingdoms like the Mughal and Kachari regimes. While the Ahoms prioritized localized resource management, agrarian expansion, and controlled trade, the Mughals relied on centralized taxation and extensive trade networks, and the Kacharis maintained a regional agrarian economy. This contrast underscores how different administrative approaches influenced economic sustainability.

The long-term economic legacy of the Ahoms is evident in Assam's governance and resource management policies. Many of their administrative structures, including land tenure systems, taxation frameworks, and economic self-sufficiency models, continued to influence Assam's economy even after their decline. The colonial economic policies that followed disrupted this indigenous system, shifting the region toward a more extractive and revenue-driven economy, which had lasting socio-economic consequences.

This study emphasizes the relevance of Ahom economic policies in shaping Assam's historical and modern economic landscape. It provides insights into how traditional governance models can contribute to contemporary economic planning, ensuring a balanced approach between historical resilience and modern development strategies for sustainable growth.

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