

## Lesson - 3

# Assamese Society in Medieval Age



### Learning outcomes :

Students will–

- ✦ acquaint themselves with the rulers of Assam.
- ✦ familiarize themselves with the unique administrative system introduced by the Ahoms.
- ✦ learn about the social perspective of medieval rulers.
- ✦ get an idea of our glorious past from the relics of medieval art, architecture and sculpture.
- ✦ compare the economic condition of the present times with the economy of medieval Assam.
- ✦ create a consciousness to study and preserve in future, the rich culture and literacy heritage of Assam.

In your previous reading you must have formed an idea of the reign of the different rulers and their rule. In this chapter, we will try to highlight on the socio-economic and cultural life of Assam.

We know by now that the period from the beginning of the 13 century to the early part of 19 century is regarded as the medieval period of Assam history. Various rulers of Kamrup Kamata, Chutia, Kachari, Baro Bhuyan and the Ahoms ruled in different parts of Assam. We get information of this age from many sources like historical manuscripts, travelogues, archeology, legends and other narratives. All these independent states had their own political ideas and beliefs, economic policy, art and culture, literature and a social outlook which set them apart from each other. However, under the capable and far sighted Ahom rulers and their socio- economic policies, a certain amount of unity came to be felt in these contemporary states.

The medieval age was under the rule of the monarch where the king was omnipotent. The duty and aim of the king was to work for the welfare of his subjects and provide a sound administration with the help of his ministers.

It can be said from the large size of the Kamrup Kamata kingdom, covering parts of present Kamrup, lower Assam, North Bengal, the district of Mymensingh of Bangladesh and their prestigious reign of almost 250 years, that these kings had a well developed administration. Unfortunately, we do not have enough recorded historical information of this period.



The Baro Bhuyans also had established small kingdoms during the middle ages. They followed the system of direct succession or lineage in their selection of kings and ministers. They had developed an indigenous system of administration and king governed his people according to the advice of his courtiers. The Baro Bhuyans of Upper Assam even had their own courts which were called **karakhana**. Later, the Baro Bhuyans were subjugated by the Ahoms but the Ahom history tells us that they were given important positions in the Ahom administration which reflect the respect that they had commanded.

Like the Kamatas and the Baro Bhuyans, the Chutias of Upper Assam also had a well organized system of administration. However, when the Ahoms defeated them, they were brought under Ahom administration.

The Ahom administration was the finest form of governance of the middle ages. The Ahoms ruled their kingdom according to the advice of three ministers called the **Burhagohain**, **Borgohain** and **Borpatrogohain**. Later, two more officers called the **Borbaruah** and **Borphukan** were also included, making a total of five ministers. There were several other officers under these ministers to run the administration smoothly.



**Pic-3.1 Ranghar**

The Ahoms had introduced some unique administrative systems like the **paik protha**, **khel system**, **posa protha**. The **paiks** provided physical labour for developmental work, service during battles and wars and were the tax payers of the kingdoms. Thus, the **paiks** were the strong foundation on which the Ahom administration stood.

### Let us know :

- ✦ All men from the age of 15 to 50yrs, who were physically fit were called **paiks**. A group of 3 or 4 **paiks** formed a group. A **paik** from every group had to provide free labour to the king. When a **paik** was working in the king's house, his work was divided among the rest of his group. Since there was no permanent army till the time of **Swargadeo** Gaurinath Singha, the **paiks** had to fight in battles when required.

**Momai Tamuli Baruah**, an efficient officer during the reign of **Swargadeu** Pratap Singha made the administration more organized and systematic by appointing some **paiks** over the **khels**. The **paik** who was responsible for **twenty groups** of **paiks** was called **Bora**, over **hundred groups** was called **Saikia**, over a **thousand group** was **Hazarika**, over **three thousand** was **Rajkhowa** and over **six thousand** was a **Phukan**. This division into **paik** and **khel** was also borrowed and introduced by the other states of the period. Similarities are noticed in Ahom **khel** system and the **Mansabdari** system of the Mughals.

Another noteworthy aspect of Ahom administration was the special agreement with the bordering hill tribes. This system introduced by the Ahom **Swargadeos** was known as the **posa protha** or system. Through this



agreement, the Ahom kings wished to protect their subjects from the raids of these tribes.

### Let us know :

- ★ The Ahom king Swargadeo Pratap Singha gave some villages of the lower Duars to the *Parbatiya* tribes and collected agricultural produce and crops from them. In return, these tribes refrained from raiding the people of the Ahom kingdom. Similar policies were followed with the Naga tribes. The land given to the Nagas is known as **Nogakhat**.

The Koch also had a well organized administrative system like the Ahoms. They too organized their subjects into groups and appointed an officer to oversee them. The Koch king Naranarayan followed many Ahom administrative reforms, the most notable being the institution of the *Paik* system.

### Activity :

- ★ Find out the bordering states of present Assam. What is the relation of Assam with these states? Discuss in groups and prepare a note.

### Social Perspective, the Status of Women, Their Attire etc.

The social outlook of medieval Assam was quite liberal. The tradition of caste discrimination prevalent in the Hindu society was absent in those days. All castes and tribes of people like the Ahoms, Kacharis, Koch, etc. lived peacefully and independently in their states. The Ahoms did not bring many women with them when they came to Assam. So they married the women of the local tribes which fostered friendly relations among them. This tradition started by Swargadeo Sukapha continued till the time of Swargadeo Chandrakanta Singha. The other rulers of medieval Assam too had profited by following this policy.

Like the other states of medieval India, Assam too had a strong presence of landlords. Two classes of landlords dominated the Ahom kingdom- the landlords of the ruling aristocracy and the ruled subjects or the *rayats*. However, due to the growing influence of Hinduism on the Ahom administration, the social distance gradually increased.

Women enjoyed a respectable position during the middle age. The women of medieval Assam not only



*Pic-3.2 Traditional dress and ornaments of Assamese women*



confined themselves to domestic chores but also fought battles and took active part in the royal administration. There are evidence that the women of Assam during the middle age in different activities like weaving and even spying. From Indian perspective, compared with others, in the Assamese society women were given much more respect in the middle age.

The people during this period dressed in a dignified manner and a person's social status could be determined from the way he or she dressed. This was perhaps due to the influence of the invaders from the west. Both men and women of the middle ages wore long pieces of cloth from their waist and long sleeved shirts and blouses. The men also wore turbans on their heads. Later, the women began to dress in *mekhela sador*. Assam silk, muga and endi were available even in those days. Many traditional clothes like the *dakhana* of the Bodos, *tongali* and *hasoti* of the Baro Bhuyans are clothes from the middle ages which are still worn today.

### Activity :

- ✦ Make a list of the clothes worn by both men and women of our society at present.

### The Economic Condition :

The economy of the middle ages was largely dependent on agriculture. Agriculture was the main occupation of the people and they produced several seasonal crops. Paddy, lentils, oil producing crops, sugarcane, jute, cotton, seasonal fruits and vegetables were grown by the Assamese people. In the hills, the tribal people practised *jhum* cultivation. Rainwater was collected in small reservoirs and the water was used to irrigate the fields. The practice of building dams to protect crops and trees can be said to have begun in the medieval period itself. It has been found

that in Cooch Behar there was a system of blocking the flow of the streams and the water used for irrigation.



**Pic-3.3 Women weaving in a loom**

the brahmins, temples, sattras and other religious institutions. History also mentions that later in course of time, they gave land for preservation and maintenance of mosques and graves. This practice is prevalent to some extent to this day.

Assam has a rich tradition of cottage industry. Among the industries, textile and weaving,



dye, ivory, bell metal works, blacksmith, goldsmith and carpentry were the primary ones. Both men and women were involved in these industries. Every household had a weaving loom and it is said that in some areas of Kamrup-Kamata both men and women were professional weavers. It can be assumed that Sualkuchi and Tantikuchi must have had their origin here.

The exchange of trade and commerce was limited in the middle ages. Self sufficiency was a basic characteristic of the age. Neither lending nor borrowing was encouraged. However, sources cite that the Ahoms had established trade with their neighbouring tribes and that they had engaged in trade with Bengal, Tibet and China and had cordial relations with them. Trade had a high growth during the Koch rule. The kings had taken up many schemes for the development of trade and commerce like constructing good roads, issuing coins, etc. In the beginning, business in the middle ages was in the form of barter system but later money became the mode of transaction.

### Activity :

- ✦ Prepare a comparative note on the irrigation system of the middle age and the present day.
- ✦ What is the mode of transaction in the Jonbil fair of Assam? Prepare a project on the Jonbil fair by taking the help of your teacher or an expert.

### Art, sculpture and architecture:

Medieval Assam was rich in art, sculpture and architecture which we have inherited.



**Pic-3.4 Remains of Kachari Capital at Dimapur**

Incidentally, these forms flourished mostly in the Ahom period. Let us discuss briefly the contribution of the medieval rulers in encouraging art and architecture.

The ruins of the Kachari capital of Dimapur show the high quality of Kachari architecture. Kacharis used bricks to wall their capital. This was even before the Ahoms knew the use of bricks. There were also many beautiful ponds and water tanks in Dimapur.

The Kacharis were also experts in constructing drains. They also beautifully carved the pillars of their houses which show the influence of the Muslim architecture of Bengal.

The temples, ponds and sculptures of the Chutias are also witnesses to a glorious age of art and culture. The remains of the *Malini than* (holy place) situated in the lower regions of Arunachal Pradesh bear the signature of Chutia art and sculpture. The famous Kamakhya temple constructed under king Naranarayan, the Haigriva-Madhav temple of Hajo, the carved statues of Naranayan and Chilarai at the entrance of the Kamakhya temple are also examples of the exquisite art and sculpture of medieval Assam.



The *douls* (the unique, curved Ahom temples) and temples, palaces and stone bridges of the Ahoms are proofs of their grand architecture. In the beginning the Ahom houses were double storied structures built with bamboo and wood and decorated beautifully with carvings. Later, their



**Pic-3.5 Haigriv-Madhav temple at Hajo**

houses were built with smooth, large and strong bricks and a mixture of molasses, black gram, lentils, limestone, snail shell powder, cat, fish, oil and resin used as cement. The famous Shivadoul, Bishnudoul and Devidoul of Sibsagar and others were constructed with these materials.

#### Let us know :

- ✦ The many temples built by the Ahom Swargadeos like the Devidoul, Jaidoul, the Umananda temple, Ugratara temple, the Siddheswar and Kameswar temples of Kamakhya, the Janarddan temple of Aswaklanta, the Shiva temple of Dergaon and Biswanath, Shukreswar temple, Rudreswar temple, Bashishthashram temple, Nabagraha temple, Dirgheswari and the Chhatrakar temple are fine examples of Ahom architecture.



**Pic-3.6 Pond of Joysagar**

Parsi architecture to some extent.

Other wonderful examples of Ahom construction are the stone bridges. Of these *Namdang*, *Dorika*, *Rahdoi* and *Dijoi* are the most prominent. The ponds and reservoirs dug by the Ahom rulers are also important landmarks of Ahom architecture. The *Rahdhola* ponds such as the Jaisagar, Sibsagar and Gauri sagar pond remains are the great heritage we have inherited from the Ahoms.

The *kareng Ghar* of Gargaon and the *Talatal Ghar* and *Rang Ghar* of Rangpur are the immortal reminders of Ahom architecture. From the time of Swargadeu Rudra Singha, the Ahom structures exhibited influence of the Mughals and the

#### Let us know :

- ✦ During those days, the source of water bodies was searched and wells were dugged. Mercury (*para*) was poured into these wells to cleanse the water and therefore, they were known as *Rahdhola Pukhuri* (The pond where mercury is poured).



We get an idea of Ahom sculpture from their *douls* and temples and also the palaces and buildings. The carvings of gods and goddesses, flowers and vines, animals, birds and natural scenery bear testimony to the remarkable Ahom sculpture. There is evidence to show that the Ahoms also had a rich tradition of terracotta craft. Similarly, the sketches and pictures found in the tenth book of the Bhagavat, Dharmapuran, Geet Govinda, Shangkhachud Badh, Ananda Lahari, Hasti Bidyayrnava also indicate the rich tradition of art of the Ahoms.

### Activity :

- ★ Find out the names of the ancient heritage sites in your district and prepare a note on them with pictures.

### Contribution to Literature and Culture:

We must remember and acknowledge that the foundation of our culture and literature was



**Pic-3.7 Shivadoul of Sivasagar**

laid in the middle ages. The age saw a number of great writers and scholars who received royal patronage. Although many writings of the period were often in praise of their kings and other patrons, they are valuable as literary documents.

The cultural and literary map of Assam was developed by the local tribes with their languages, the Kamata kings and the Ahoms. The language, literature and the cultural

tradition as we now know, owes its origin not to one but to every community and tribe and is therefore, the common treasure of all. The great poets Hem Saraswati, Kaviratna Saraswati and Harihar Bipra wrote their great compositions under the patronage of the kings of Kamrup-Kamata. Similarly, Madhav Kandali composed his Ramayana under the patronage of the Kachari king Mahamanikya. It was during the reign of this ruler Mahendra Kandali, the teacher of Sankardev ran his religious school.

The greatest contributions of the Ahoms to literature were their written histories. The Mahabharata, Ramayana and the Puranas written in the Tai language were translated into Assamese during their rule. Besides these, many other important books were written during the reign of the Ahoms. Sukumar Borkaith wrote **Hasti Bidyarnava** at the behest of king Shiva Singha and his queen Ambika. Similarly, under the patronage of Swargadeo Rudra Singha Ramnarayan Chakravorty translated into Assamese the **Geet Govinda**, **Brahmabairarta Purana**, **Shakuntala Kavya** and



also composed the epic **Shankhachud Badh**.

Under the patronage of the Koch- Darrangi kings, the great poet Narayandev wrote the



**Pic-3.8 Sattriya dance**

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**Padmapurana** in Assamese and Baladev Surjyakhari Daivagya wrote **Darrang Rajbangshavali**. Ram Saraswati wrote the **Mahabharata**, Purushottam Bidyabagish wrote the grammar **Ratnamala Vyakarana** in Sanskrit and Ananta Kandali translated into Assamese the **Bhagavata** and many other books under the patronage of the great Koch king Naranarayana.

One of the greatest contributions of King Naranarayan is the creation of a favourable atmosphere for the genius like Srimanta Sankardeva to flourish. Sankardeva is the founder of the Bhakti movement in Assam and he propagated Assamese vaishnavism. He wrote in the Brajawali and Assamese languages and has enriched the treasure of Assamese languages with his poetic and dramatic compositions and translations.

This literary trend that developed as a result of the Neo- vaishnavism saw the rise of writers like Baikunthanath Bhattacharjee or Bhattadev, Ananta Kandali, Sridhar Kandali, Ram Saraswati, Ramcharan Thakur and others. Bhattadev is regarded as the first prose writer in India. He composed the **Katha Gita**. The biographies of the vaishnavite *gurus* are also the important literary landmarks of the period. **Katha Guru Charit** is an important hagiography of the period.

The music of the medieval period has also exerted great influence on the Assamese society. Assam has a rich tradition of classical dance and music. Srimanta Sankardeva created a new form of dance and music by taking these existing forms as his base to propagate his teachings. Sankardeva's creative artistry was exhibited in the oja-pali, nam kirtan, borgeet, dance and dance dramas which are still performed today. The contribution of these performing art forms to the creation of a unified society is unparalleled.

### Let us remember:

- ★ The beginning of the 13th century to the early period of 19th century is regarded as the medieval period of Assam.
- ★ The medieval period was ruled by the monarchy and the king was omnipotent. The king ruled his kingdom with the help of his ministers.
- ★ The Bhuyans of upper Assam had their own administration and courts of law.
- ★ The division into *paiks*, *khel* and *posa* system was a unique innovation of Ahom administration.



- ✦ The Ahoms assimilated with the local people by marrying their women.
- ✦ The medieval society had a liberal outlook.
- ✦ The construction of dams and the method of blocking the streams and rivulets for irrigation first began in the middle ages.
- ✦ The Ahoms had established trade with Bengal, Tibet, China, etc.
- ✦ Kacharis discovered the use of bricks before the Ahoms. The influence of the Muslims of Bengal can be seen in Kachari architecture.
- ✦ The architecture and the sculpture of Malini *than* situated in the lower regions of Arunachal Pradesh is an example of the superior art of the Chutias.
- ✦ The Ahoms have left a noteworthy heritage of architecture, sculpture, art, culture and literature.
- ✦ The foundation of modern art, culture and literature was laid in the medieval period itself. The ethnic linguistic communities, the Kamata kings and the Ahoms drew the cultural and literary map of Assam.
- ✦ The genius of Srimanta Sankardeva received the patronage of the great king, Naranarayan.

## Exercise

1. Write short answers:
  - (a) Name the important kingdoms of medieval Assam.
  - (b) The women of which community wear the *dakhana*?
  - (c) Who were the owners of land during the Ahom rule?
  - (d) What was the mode of exchange in trade and commerce during the middle ages?
  - (e) Who had established a religious school at Bordowa of Alipukhuri by the river Kapili?
2. Match the following:

Group A	Group B
Madhav Kandali	Ratnamala
Sukumar Borkaith	Darrang Rajbangshavali
Purushottam Bidyabagish	Ramayana
Bhattadev	Hasti Bidyarnav
Baladev Surjyakhari Daivagya	Katha Gita



3. Fill in the blanks:
- (a) The Hayagriva Madhav temple was constructed by\_\_\_\_\_.
  - (b) The women of the middle ages had a \_\_\_\_\_ position.
  - (c) The tribal people followed \_\_\_\_\_cultivation.
  - (d) Ananta Kandali translated \_\_\_\_\_ into Assamese.
  - (e) \_\_\_\_\_ was an important characteristic of the middle ages.
4. Tick the correct answer:
- (a) The administration of medieval age was monarchic/ democratic.
  - (b) The Ahoms/ Koch introduced the *paik* system.
  - (c) The *hasoti* and the *tongali* belonged to the Bodos/ Baro Bhuyans.
  - (d) Ahom architecture was influenced by the Mughals and the Parsis from the time of Swargadeo Rudra Singha/ Swargadeo Shiva Singha.
  - (e) The Kacharis/ Koch were experts in construction of drains.
5. Answer within fifty words:
- (a) The *paik* system of the Ahoms.
  - (b) Why did the Ahoms introduce the *posa* system?
  - (c) What was the role played by the women of medieval Assam?
  - (d) The agriculture of the middle ages.
  - (e) What were the important features of Kachari architecture?
6. Prepare a note on the economic activity of medieval Assam.
7. Give your opinion on the Ahom's policy on land.
8. Collect and make an album of pictures of the temples built during the middle ages.
9. Make a list of the books and their writers and composers of the middle ages.
10. "The language, literature and cultural tradition as we now know, owe their origin not to one but to every community and tribe and is therefore, the common treasure of all." Explain the quoted sentence.

