

Contextualizing Local Trade through Coins of Lower Denomination by the Ahoms (Medieval Period)

Dr. Sukhwinder Kalsi

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sambhu Nath College, Labpur, Birbhum

Abstract:

The history of North East India is a relatively less explored area. During the pre – modern era, six independent dynastic kingdoms viz. Tripura, Cooch Bejhar, Ahom, Kachar, Jaintiapur and Manipur flourished in the region. Each had its own independent government and currency system. The fact that each of these regional kingdoms had their own currencies for a long period indicates that they had developed their trade and trade relation with other areas. As the Ahoms believe in their self sufficiency they did not mix freely with other states and limited quantity of essential commodities were allowed to enter the state. Foreign traders were not encouraged to set within the Ahom Kingdom. Thus issuing of lower denominations indicates the growing use of money in trade where smaller transactions were done in terms of money exchange. The paper attempts to present a study of the coins of lower denominations struck by the Ahom rulers and their use in local trade.

Key Words: ahoms, paiks, denomination, cowries.

1. Introduction:

The Ahoms, belonging to the branch of Tai race, entered Assam from the east in the early 13th century, and established their kingdom in the upper Brahmaputra valley. Their tribal leader Sukapha carved out a kingdom in the upper Assam and it came to be known as Ahom Kingdom. The Ahom Kingdom gradually increased in power and became stable particularly during the reign of Suhung Mung (1497-1539).

There are no coins recorded of Suhung Mung or his successors about hundred years. The absence of coinage shows that the market was closed to the outside trade during this period. Actually, the Ahoms were originally a tribal people. Majority of their subjects too were tribal. They preferred isolation then to mix with or have regular commercial or cultural relations with the outside world. This had influence on their economy. They preferred barter system. Hence during the early period their economy and trade were based on exchange of goods. The officers were granted land in lieu of their salary. Paiks (or labour) were granted to them. *Paik System* was the backbone of the Ahom economy and administration. Under this system all males under the age group of 15-50 were expected to serve the state. *Paiks* were to serve the state throughout the year, both in times of war and peace. Thus, they were not only responsible for the maintenance of the integrity of the Ahom state but also for its agricultural and economy.

The Ahoms had the practice of giving grants to the Brahmins and their subjects. Gold, silver, clothes, oil, ghee, etc. were given as gifts to the subjects. Lands were also given as grants to them. At a later stage when there was a shortage of land this purpose was served by the cowries. Cowries played an important role as a medium of exchange in transactions. The inspirational evidence combined with the evidence from literature, folk songs and proverbs shows the use of cowrie shells in Assam in the historical period. Scarcity of coins in the pre - Ahom period indicates that the transactions were largely conducted with the

help of cowries. In fact, cowries continued to circulate in some parts of the interior regions even during the British period. And it was finally after the introduction of the copper coins by the British that their circulation gradually came to an end. The Assam State Museum authorities have collected three hoards of cowries buried in earthen pots from Guwahati, Lanka, and Hojai. The discovery of these three hoards point to the use of cowries in Assam.

Gradually the cowries also probably became scarce and some of the other neighboring states started issuing their coins. This necessitated the issuance of coined money by the Ahom State also. Initially the purpose of issuing coins were perhaps more ritualistic as the coins were struck only at the time of the coronation of the King and were distributed by the Ahom Kings and queens to the Brahmins and other including women and children as gifts.

Of course these coins could be used for buying goods and so they had a monetary use as well. It was in the reign of Rudra Simha that the trade and commerce with the other regions got encouragement. As a result of this the need for more coins and lower denomination coins was felt. And from the reign of Rudra Simha, we find, coins being issued in larger numbers and throughout the reign of the king and also in lower denominations.

The Ahoms started to strike their coinage from the year 1648 AD. Jayadhwaj Simha was the first Ahom ruler to issue coins. After him sixteen other rulers ruled over the Ahom kingdom from 1648 till 1825, and all of them coined money. Initially, Jayadhwaj Simha and his successors Chakradhwaj Simha, Udayaditya Simha and Gadadhara Simha struck coins of rupee denominations only. It was from the time of Rudra Simha (AD 1696-1714) that coins of lower denominations began to be struck. Apart from full - rupees (silver) and full - mohur (gold), he also struck half - rupee and quarter - rupee coins. Another denomination of $1/8^{\text{th}}$ rupee was introduced in the reign of Pramatta Simha (AD 1744-1751). Subsequently, Rajeswar Simha and Gaurinatha Simha introduced two denominations of $1/16^{\text{th}}$ and $1/32^{\text{nd}}$ rupee respectively, besides continuing the other denominations. The successors of Gaurinatha Simha also issued small fractional coins.

The Ahoms coins were mainly issued in silver. Though gold coins were known but they are much more rare. Coins of all the denominations are generally octagonal in shape though some circular and square shaped coins were also issued. These coins bear inscriptions on both the sides generally in Assamese-Bengali script. However, some coins with the Persian legend were also issued.

The fact that several lower denominations of Ahom coins were issued indicate the growing use of money in trade and even small transactions. Inscriptions provide some important evidence of the use of coins in transactions and also about markets. Money supply seems to have increased from the close of the 17th century and grew substantially in the next two centuries. Apart from the Ahom coins, non-Ahom coins are also found in the Brahmaputra valley. Although the Ahoms cultivated everything they required, there were still some commodities that they needed and were not locally produced. Besides people from the hills came to buy and sell their products. Thus, there was a growth of several markets or hats in different parts of the kingdom, which later grew into towns. According to later Buranjis Pratap Simha set up rules to regulate the sale of goods in markets. Later, King Rajeswar Simha fixed different rates of *hatakara* on the values of the commodities sold.

As mentioned above, there are inscriptional records to show that gradually there was increased use of money in the economy. Besides, these records also provide valuable information about the taxes, prices of goods and purchasing capacity of money in circulation. Some such information are collected here:

An inscription of Saka 1738 (AD 1816) records the reinstallation of one Atiram Choudhury both as Choudhury and Patwari of Bausi – pargana against annual payment of takas 1300 (650 for six months) by Svargadeva Chandrakanta Simha (1810-18). Thus his monthly payment was takas 108-33.

Another inscription informs us that two silver rupee were given for buying wicks for continuous lighting of lamp (akhandapradipa). The grant was made in Saka 1727 (AD 1805). A copper plate of the reign of Gaurinatha Simha In Assam State Museum dated Saka 1707 (AD1805) refers to the purchase of 20 puras of land for 20 narayani rupeed.

This grant provides the rate of one pura of waste-land (borimati) as Rs. 1; that of dry cultivation land (faringati) between Rs 1 and 10 annas and Rs 2. The selling rate of wet paddy land (rawatimati) was Rs 2.5 per pura. An indirect reference suggested that the price of 180 seers of mustard oil was Rs 22 and half. From this information it may be inferred that 8 seers of oil could be bought for Rs 1 and in $1/16^{\text{th}}$ rupee or one anna, half seer of mustard oil could be purchased. The poor people could thus easily buy the items of day to day needs with the small coins.

A copper plate grant of Saka 1661 (AD 1739) gives prices of various commodities as follows:

Milk was sold at the rate of 2 and $1/2$ anna (or $1/32^{\text{nd}}$ rupee) per maund. Betal leaves were sold at 1 anna or $1/16^{\text{th}}$ rupee per 40 bundles. Hence 20 bundles of betel leaves could easily be purchased for $1/32^{\text{nd}}$ rupee or $1/2$ anna. Rice was sold at a rate of $21/5$ annas per maund, gram at 4 annas per maund and so on. Other records of the same period also provide some prices:

Rice was sold at the rate of 4 annas or $1/4^{\text{th}}$ rupee per maund. Pulses and ghee were sold at 10 annas per maund. The prices of betel leaves later decreased i.e., 1 anna or $1/16^{\text{th}}$ rupee per 20 bundles of betel leaves for $1/32^{\text{nd}}$ rupee. Ducks were sold at 1 anna or $1/16^{\text{th}}$ rupee each. Dhotis were sold at 5 annas each.¹In March 1793, buffaloes and cows were sold at rupees five and two respectively.

These references definitely indicate that 17th century onwards, particularly during the 18th – 19th centuries, the lower denomination coins were used for buying goods in the Ahom kingdoms. This was the period when other neighboring states also produced their own coins.

2. Conclusion:

In conclusion we may say that Ahom coinage shows impact upon their society and economy. During the 18th century and 19th century their self centered nature shifted to grow up relations with other states as well as outside countries. The lower denominations produced during the later 18th and 19th century would seem to be used in circulation. But such use seems to have been limited and the lower denominations are often in very fine conditions. Thus, the lower denominations though initially used for giving gifts to the Brahmins and their subjects, but in later period they became a good medium of exchange. Being a tribal country they need to do small transactions and purchases which were only met by lower denominations. In this way the origin and development of Ahom coins provides a good example of the theory of origin of money from gifts. And this accumulation of coined money led them to use it for exchanging commodities, buying lands and creating endowments. In this way the issuing of lower denominational coins had two fold impacts, on the one hand it helped in small transactions and on the other hand for ceremonial purpose.

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