

AHOM MIGRATION: ITS IMPACT ON RICE ECONOMY OF MEDIEVAL ASSAM

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THE ECONOMY of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, in many ways a typical case of isolation, exhibits certain special features deriving from its history, physical configuration and social structure. The valley extending over an area of about 22,000 square miles of flat plains is shut in by hills on all sides except the west. From time immemorial, its agriculture has been dominated by various tribes, mainly of the Tibeto-Burman stock. On conversion to Hinduism in course of time, many of them became altogether new castes, as such unknown elsewhere in the rest of India. Archaeological ruins, extant epigraphic records and the predominance of the Sanskrit-based Assamese language undoubtedly prove the early existence of a process of Aryanization in this valley. But never was it very deep. In the medieval times, Muslim administration or Islam could touch only a fringe of its heterogeneous society. In fact, many tribes did manage to continue their fossilized ways of life down to the present century. The agrarian history of the valley is particularly influenced by this isolation. The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of the thirteenth-century Ahom immigration on the valley's medieval agriculture. It is then that a section of the Northern Shan tribe of Upper Burma entered Assam and came to be known as Ahoms. Numbering about nine thousand at the beginning, they rapidly swelled in number through assimilation of local population as well as fast natural growth. They also received fresh groups of Shan migrants from Upper Burma from time to time. Within three centuries, they built up a strong state and held almost the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, except the district of Goalpara, under their rule till the early nineteenth century. Their contribution to Assam's agriculture is interesting in more than one respect.

During the period between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century,

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