

Adi–Ahom Relations in Pre-Colonial Assam: A Historical and Historiographical Study

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Abstract: The historical relationship between the Adi tribes of the eastern Himalayan region and the Ahom kingdom of the Brahmaputra valley represents a long and complex frontier interaction shaped by geography, political organization, economic exchange, and military encounters. Far from being a simple narrative of conflict between a centralized state and stateless hill communities, Adi–Ahom relations evolved through cycles of warfare, negotiation, trade, and accommodation. This paper examines these relations from the thirteenth century until the advent of British colonial rule, drawing upon Ahom chronicles, colonial records, anthropological studies, and Adi oral traditions. It argues that the frontier between the Adis and the Ahoms functioned as a dynamic borderland where sovereignty was contested, negotiated, and mutually shaped rather than clearly defined. By foregrounding indigenous agency and questioning state-centric historiography, the paper seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Northeast Indian history.

Keywords: Adi Tribe; Ahom Kingdom; Assam History; Frontier Studies; Northeast India; Siang Valley; Brahmaputra Valley; Tribal–State Relations; Borderland History; Pre-Colonial Warfare; Trade Networks; Colonial Historiography; Indigenous Agency.

Introduction

The study of Northeast Indian history has long been dominated by narratives centered on kingdoms, dynasties, and colonial administration, often marginalizing the role of indigenous hill societies. Among the most significant yet understudied historical relationships in the region is that between the Adi tribes of present-day Arunachal Pradesh and the Ahom kingdom of Assam. From the thirteenth century onward, the expansion of the Ahom polity into the Brahmaputra valley brought it into sustained contact with the Adis inhabiting the upper reaches of the Siang River and its surrounding hills. These interactions shaped political boundaries, economic systems, and cultural perceptions on both sides of the frontier.

Adi–Ahom relations cannot be understood through a simplistic framework of conquest and resistance. Instead, they represent a long-term process of engagement between two fundamentally different social and political systems: a centralized agrarian state and decentralized kin-based hill societies. This paper examines these relations in depth, situating them within broader debates on frontier history, tribal–state interaction, and indigenous agency.

Geographical Foundations of Adi–Ahom Interaction

Geography played a decisive role in shaping the nature of Adi–Ahom relations. The Brahmaputra River, known upstream as the Siang, acted simultaneously as a corridor of interaction and a natural

barrier. While the river facilitated movement, trade, and communication, the surrounding mountainous terrain, dense forests, and unpredictable climatic conditions restricted sustained military penetration by the Ahom state into Adi territory. The Adis occupied ecologically diverse uplands that provided strategic depth and natural defense, enabling them to maintain autonomy despite repeated external pressures.

For the Ahoms, whose political and economic base lay in the fertile plains of the Brahmaputra valley, the hills represented both a resource frontier and a zone of insecurity. This geographical contrast produced a frontier characterized not by fixed boundaries but by shifting zones of influence and negotiation.

The Adi Tribe: Social and Political Organization

Adi society was organized around clans and villages rather than centralized authority. Political power rested with village councils and elders who governed through customary law and consensus-based decision-making. Leadership was situational and based on personal reputation, ritual knowledge, and experience rather than hereditary kingship. This political structure made the Adis highly resilient to external domination, as there was no single authority whose submission could guarantee control over the entire community.

The absence of centralized authority also shaped the nature of Adi interaction with the Ahoms. Engagements were often localized and episodic, involving specific villages or clans rather than the Adi society as a whole. This decentralized structure fundamentally limited the effectiveness of Ahom military campaigns in the hills.

The Ahom State and Its Expansionist Imperatives

The Ahom kingdom, established in the thirteenth century, developed into one of the most powerful polities in pre-colonial Northeast India. Its strength lay in a centralized monarchy supported by the Paik system, which organized labor, military service, and agricultural production. Expansion was driven by the need for arable land, manpower, and strategic security.

As the Ahom state consolidated control over the Brahmaputra valley, it increasingly encountered hill communities along its northern and eastern frontiers. While the Ahoms successfully incorporated many plains populations into their administrative system, hill societies such as the Adis resisted integration due to ecological differences and incompatible political structures.

Early Contacts and Patterns of Engagement

Early Adi–Ahom interactions were characterized by cautious engagement rather than sustained hostility. Trade, gift exchange, and limited diplomacy coexisted with sporadic conflict. Frontier zones functioned as spaces of interaction where both sides tested each other's strength and intentions. Over time, as Ahom territorial expansion intensified, these encounters became more frequent and often more violent.

continuity underscores the pragmatic nature of frontier relations, where survival and economic necessity often outweighed ideological hostility.

Trade and Economic Interdependence

Economic exchange formed a crucial component of Adi–Ahom relations. The Adis supplied forest products such as timber, bamboo, cane, medicinal plants, and animal goods, which were valuable to the Ahom economy. In return, the Ahoms provided iron tools, weapons, salt, and textiles. These exchanges created networks of interdependence that mitigated the intensity of conflict and fostered periodic cooperation.

Trade often took place in frontier markets that functioned as neutral spaces, temporarily suspending hostilities. These economic interactions challenge colonial portrayals of tribal societies as isolated and economically primitive.

Trade and economic exchange formed one of the most enduring and stabilizing dimensions of the relationship between the Adi tribes of the eastern Himalayan hills and the Ahom kingdom of the Brahmaputra valley. While political relations between the two were often marked by conflict, raids, and military expeditions, economic interaction created channels of communication and cooperation that mitigated hostility and sustained long-term engagement. The Adi–Ahom relationship thus cannot be understood solely through the lens of warfare; it must also be viewed as a system of mutual economic dependence shaped by ecological diversity and frontier pragmatism.

The ecological contrast between the hill regions inhabited by the Adis and the fertile plains controlled by the Ahoms created the material basis for trade. The Ahom economy was predominantly agrarian, centered on wet-rice cultivation, supported by irrigation systems and surplus production. In contrast, the Adis practiced shifting cultivation, hunting, fishing, and forest-based subsistence. This divergence in ecological adaptation ensured that each society possessed resources that the other lacked, making exchange both necessary and advantageous.

The Adi tribes supplied the Ahom kingdom with a variety of forest and hill products that were scarce or unavailable in the plains. These included timber, bamboo, cane, medicinal plants, resins, animal skins, feathers, ivory substitutes, and wild produce. Bamboo and cane were particularly valuable, as they were essential for construction, basketry, and military logistics in the Ahom state. Medicinal plants sourced from the hills were also important, both for local healing practices and for elite consumption within the Ahom court. Through these supplies, the Adis became integral contributors to the material economy of the valley.

In return, the Ahoms provided the Adis with manufactured and agricultural goods that could not be easily produced in the hills. Iron tools and weapons were among the most significant items exchanged. Access to iron greatly enhanced agricultural productivity, hunting efficiency, and warfare capabilities within Adi society. Salt, which was scarce in the uplands, was another crucial commodity obtained through trade with the plains. Additionally, textiles, ornaments, and certain food grains circulated from the Ahom areas into Adi communities, gradually becoming embedded in local consumption patterns.

Trade between the Adis and the Ahoms was often conducted through frontier markets and intermediary zones located near the foothills. These spaces functioned as neutral grounds where economic exchange could take place even during periods of political tension. Violence was typically suspended in these zones, reflecting an implicit recognition by both sides of the importance of trade for survival and prosperity. Such markets highlight the rational and strategic nature of frontier interaction, contradicting colonial portrayals of tribal societies as irrationally hostile.

Economic interdependence also shaped the rhythm of conflict and peace. Raiding and warfare were often linked to disruptions in trade or failures in negotiated arrangements such as the Posa system. When access to desired goods was blocked or frontier agreements broke down, economic pressures could quickly translate into violence. Conversely, the restoration of trade often accompanied diplomatic settlements, underscoring the central role of economic exchange in stabilizing relations.

The Ahom state recognized the importance of maintaining trade links with the Adis and other hill tribes. Rather than attempting to monopolize or heavily regulate frontier trade, the Ahoms largely allowed it to function through customary practices and local intermediaries. This approach reflected the limits of state power in hill regions and the recognition that economic cooperation was more effective than coercive control. Frontier officials acted as facilitators rather than administrators, further emphasizing the negotiated nature of economic relations.

For the Adis, trade with the Ahoms did not imply subordination or dependency in a political sense. Instead, it represented a strategic engagement that enhanced material well-being while preserving autonomy. Adi communities selectively adopted external goods without abandoning their indigenous economic systems or social institutions. This selective integration demonstrates the agency of the Adis in shaping the terms of economic interaction.

Colonial intervention significantly disrupted these traditional trade networks. British administrators imposed rigid boundaries, restricted movement, and reclassified frontier zones, undermining long-standing systems of exchange. The decline of Ahom political authority and the abolition of indigenous frontier institutions weakened economic interdependence and often intensified misunderstandings between hill societies and colonial authorities. In this sense, colonial rule fragmented an earlier system that, despite its conflicts, had allowed for sustained economic interaction.

In historical perspective, Adi–Ahom trade illustrates how frontier economies functioned through reciprocity rather than domination. Economic interdependence created a shared interest in maintaining communication, even amid conflict. It reveals that the Adi–Ahom frontier was not merely a zone of hostility but a dynamic space of exchange, negotiation, and adaptation shaped by ecological diversity and mutual need.

Warfare, Raiding, and Military Strategy

Conflict between the Adis and the Ahoms was frequent but rarely decisive. Warfare typically took the form of seasonal raids rather than large-scale campaigns of conquest. Adi warriors relied on guerrilla tactics, ambushes, and intimate knowledge of the terrain, while Ahom forces, trained for plains warfare, struggled to adapt to hill environments.

Ahom chronicles record numerous punitive expeditions into the hills, often framed as assertions of royal authority. Yet these campaigns rarely resulted in permanent occupation or administrative control. Instead, they reinforced the frontier as a zone of contestation rather than subjugation.

Diplomacy, Tribute, and Negotiated Authority

Alongside warfare, diplomacy played an important role in regulating Adi–Ahom relations. Temporary tribute arrangements, exchange of gifts, and negotiated settlements were employed to stabilize frontier relations. Tribute, where it existed, was symbolic and situational rather than indicative of lasting political submission.

These practices reflect a pragmatic approach to governance, where both sides recognized the limits of coercion and the value of negotiated coexistence.

Cultural Interaction and Selective Borrowing

Cultural exchange between the Adis and the Ahoms was limited but significant. Material culture, including tools and weapons, circulated across the frontier, while social and religious systems remained largely distinct. The Adis retained their indigenous belief systems and ritual practices, demonstrating cultural resilience despite prolonged contact with a powerful state.

Selective borrowing highlights the agency of Adi communities in shaping the terms of interaction rather than passively absorbing external influences.

Colonial Intervention and the Rewriting of the Frontier

British colonial expansion fundamentally altered Adi–Ahom relations. The collapse of the Ahom kingdom removed the primary valley-based political actor, while colonial administrators imposed rigid boundaries and new forms of governance. Tribal areas were classified as excluded or partially excluded, disrupting long-standing patterns of interaction between hills and plains.

Colonial ethnography often exaggerated tribal violence and portrayed hill societies as inherently hostile, justifying administrative segregation and military intervention.

Historiographical Perspectives

Colonial historians tended to portray the Ahoms as civilizing rulers and the Adis as disruptive hill tribes. Post-colonial scholarship has increasingly challenged this narrative, emphasizing indigenous agency, economic interdependence, and the negotiated nature of frontier relations. Oral traditions and anthropological studies have played a crucial role in recovering alternative perspectives.

The Posa System and the Adi Tribes under the Ahom State

The Posa system was one of the most distinctive institutional mechanisms through which the Ahom kingdom managed its relations with the hill tribes of the eastern Himalayan frontier, including the Adi tribes inhabiting the upper Brahmaputra–Siang region. Rather than being a straightforward tax or tribute system, Posa represented a complex arrangement of political negotiation, economic exchange, and frontier diplomacy. It functioned as a means by which the Ahom state sought to regulate conflict, ensure frontier security, and maintain a degree of influence over autonomous hill societies without attempting full administrative incorporation.

Posa may be broadly understood as a customary allowance or payment given by the Ahom state to certain hill tribes in return for peace, non-aggression, and regulated interaction. In the context of the Adi tribes, Posa was not an instrument of subjugation but a mutually recognized agreement that acknowledged Adi autonomy while allowing the Ahoms to stabilize their northern frontier.

Origins and Rationale of the Posa System

The emergence of the Posa system must be understood against the backdrop of repeated Adi raids into the Brahmaputra valley and Ahom military expeditions into the hills. The Ahom rulers soon realized that sustained military control over the Adi-inhabited hills was neither economically viable nor strategically effective. The rugged terrain, decentralized Adi political structure, and guerrilla tactics rendered conventional warfare inconclusive.

In response, the Ahom state adopted a pragmatic frontier policy. Instead of pursuing costly campaigns, the Ahoms institutionalized Posa as a mechanism to transform hostile relations into regulated coexistence. Through Posa, the Ahoms effectively converted periodic conflict into a negotiated system of frontier management.

Nature of Posa in Adi–Ahom Relations

In the case of the Adi tribes, Posa consisted of periodic payments or supplies made by the Ahom authorities to specific Adi villages or clans. These payments typically included items such as rice, salt, iron tools, cloth, and sometimes livestock. Importantly, Posa was not extracted from the Adis; rather, it flowed from the Ahom state to the hill communities.

In return, the Adis were expected to:

1. refrain from raiding Ahom villages
2. allow safe passage through certain routes
3. maintain peace along agreed frontier zones

This reciprocal arrangement reveals that Posa functioned less as tribute and more as a peace-maintenance allowance.

Posa and Adi Autonomy

One of the most significant aspects of the Posa system was its implicit recognition of Adi political independence. The Ahoms did not attempt to impose the Paik system, revenue administration, or direct governance over the Adis. Instead, Posa acknowledged that Adi villages could not be ruled in the same manner as plains populations.

Adi participation in the Posa system was voluntary and conditional. If Ahom payments were delayed or reduced, Adi groups often resumed raids, demonstrating that the system depended on continued negotiation rather than coercion. This dynamic clearly shows that the Adis were not passive recipients of Ahom policy but active agents shaping frontier relations.

Administration of Posa

The administration of Posa was handled through Ahom frontier officials, often stationed near the foothills. These officials acted as intermediaries between the Ahom court and Adi leaders. They were responsible for distributing Posa payments, negotiating disputes, and reporting frontier conditions to the capital. However, the authority of these officials was limited. They relied heavily on diplomacy

and personal relationships rather than formal power. This further underlines the non-bureaucratic and negotiated nature of Ahom control over hill regions.

Posa as a Frontier Institution, Not a Tax

Colonial and early nationalist historians often misunderstood Posa as a form of tribute paid by tribes to the Ahom king. Modern scholarship has corrected this interpretation by emphasizing that Posa was paid by the state to the tribes, not the other way around. This distinction is crucial for understanding Adi–Ahom relations. Rather than indicating Ahom sovereignty over the Adis, Posa signified the limits of state power and the necessity of accommodation in frontier zones. It represented a political compromise shaped by geography, military constraints, and economic interdependence.

Impact of Posa on Adi–Ahom Relations

The Posa system contributed significantly to periods of relative peace along the Ahom–Adi frontier. By institutionalizing exchange and dialogue, it reduced the frequency of violent encounters and facilitated trade and communication. At the same time, it reinforced the frontier as a zone of interaction rather than integration.

For the Adis, Posa provided access to valuable resources while preserving autonomy. For the Ahoms, it offered a cost-effective alternative to military occupation and helped protect agrarian settlements in the plains.

Colonial Disruption of the Posa System

With the advent of British colonial rule, the Posa system was gradually dismantled. British administrators, unfamiliar with indigenous frontier institutions, viewed Posa as inefficient and incompatible with colonial governance. The abolition of Posa disrupted established channels of negotiation and often led to renewed conflict between hill tribes and colonial authorities. This disruption highlights the effectiveness of Posa as a locally adapted political institution that colonial rule failed to replace adequately.

Historical Significance of Posa in Adi–Ahom Relations

The Posa system stands as a powerful example of indigenous statecraft in pre-colonial Assam. It demonstrates that Ahom rulers developed flexible and pragmatic strategies to manage diversity and frontier complexity. At the same time, it affirms the agency of the Adi tribes in shaping the terms of engagement with a powerful state.

Understanding Posa allows historians to move beyond narratives of domination and resistance and toward a more nuanced appreciation of negotiated power, mutual dependence, and frontier governance in Northeast India.

Conclusion

Adi–Ahom relations were shaped by geography, political organization, economic necessity, and cultural resilience. They cannot be reduced to narratives of domination or resistance but must be understood as a complex frontier interaction involving negotiation, conflict, and coexistence. Recognizing the agency of Adi communities fundamentally reshapes our understanding of Assam's pre-colonial history and challenges state-centric historiographical frameworks.

Posa was not merely an economic arrangement but a political institution that structured Adi–Ahom relations for centuries. It reflected the realities of frontier life, where sovereignty was negotiated rather than imposed. By recognizing Adi autonomy while ensuring frontier stability, the Posa system exemplifies the adaptive capacity of the Ahom state and the resilience of Adi society. Its study is essential for understanding the broader dynamics of tribal–state relations in pre-colonial Northeast India.

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