

Urbanization in Assam During the Early Tungkhungia Period (1680–1780)

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Abstract : *This research delves into the evolution of urbanization in Assam during the early Tungkhungia period (1680–1780), with particular emphasis on the dynamic reign of King Rudra Singha. In response to continued Mughal incursions, the Ahom kingdom not only defended its frontiers but also initiated significant cultural and urban reforms. The development of Rangpur as a meticulously planned capital highlights a shift toward centralized governance and architectural innovation. Encounters with the Mughals introduced novel technologies, design elements, and cultural practices, resulting in a blend of indigenous and external influences across urban life. Economically, this era saw the introduction of coinage, expansion of trade networks, and formalization of market systems. Diplomatic outreach to neighboring states such as Tripura and Bengal marked the rise of a cosmopolitan political culture. The diversification of urban populations—with the settlement of craftsmen, merchants, and musicians—reflected changing occupational dynamics. Urban spaces also functioned as centers of administration and military strategy, supported by surplus agrarian production. Additionally, the promotion of Sakta Hinduism and investment in religious infrastructure played a vital role in shaping the spiritual and cultural landscape of emerging urban centers. This study concludes that the early Tungkhungia period represents a transformative era in pre-colonial Assam, where political consolidation, economic innovation, and cultural assimilation coalesced to define a distinct urban experience.*

Keywords: *Ahom Kingdom, Rudra Singha, Tungkhungia Period, Urbanization, Rangpur City, Mughal Influence, Trade and Economy, Religious Architecture.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

During the seventeenth century, the Ahom state encountered a significant threat due to the Mughals' expansion toward the east. Although the Mughals had extended their control across most of the subcontinent, the north-eastern region remained beyond their reach. Beginning with the reign of Pratap Singha (1604–1641), the Ahoms intensified their movements westward, leading to inevitable clashes with the Mughal forces. The Ahoms effectively held back the Mughal advance, and boundaries were drawn with the Barnadi River on the north bank and the Asurar Ali on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra.

Despite these defenses, Mughal expansion persisted throughout the century, resulting in repeated military engagements. A major setback for the Ahoms occurred in 1662–63 when Mir Jumla's forces pushed into the region. Following this, the Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha (1648–63) was compelled to sign a treaty at Ghiladhari ghat in January 1663. The treaty required him to send his daughter to the Mughal harem, pay war reparations, and surrender territories including Kamrup

and parts of Central Assam. However, under the leadership of Lachit Barphukan, the Ahoms achieved a decisive victory at the Battle of Saraighat in 1671. Later, in 1682, Gadadhar Singha expelled the remaining Mughal forces from Guwahati, after which the river Manas was established as the western boundary of the Ahom kingdom.

Mughal contact also brought a flow of new cultural elements into the Brahmaputra valley. These interactions allowed the Ahoms to observe and engage with the splendor of Mughal society. During the Mughal stay at Garhgaon, several prisoners of war were left behind and eventually settled near Sibsagar. These individuals, along with other members of the invading forces, facilitated the spread of new religious and cultural ideas in Assam. These influences became particularly noticeable during Rudra Singha's rule (1696–1714), when the king welcomed foreign priests, physicians, musicians, skilled craftsmen, and other influential individuals to his court. Some of these visitors were sent back with royal gifts, signaling an openness to external cultural influences.

A Tripura envoy noted the elaborate celebration of Durga Puja at Rangpur, the newly established capital. Craftsmen such as jewellers, weavers, potters, and tailors were encouraged to settle in the region. Rudra Singha actively promoted learning, the arts, and cultural activities. He commissioned the construction of royal buildings like the palace at Rangpur, designed by architects from Bengal. Another significant structure, the Talatal Ghar at Tengabari, included underground levels. Temples were built as well, and festivals such as Holi were celebrated. The architectural styles of these buildings reflected strong Bengali influences. The bricks used for construction were crafted by Ghanasauddin, a Muslim architect from Bengal, highlighting the cross-cultural exchange initiated through Mughal encounters.

Changes in royal attire also appeared during this period. The adoption of cloaks, turbans, and shoes in Mughal fashion became notable. These items were offered as gifts to Ahom ministers, although initially accepted only by the Buragohain. Eventually, such gifts became customary. Cultural transformations also included the arrival of entertainers from Bengal and the incorporation of Mughal-Rajput painting styles in manuscripts like the Barak puthis, which depicted stories from Krishna's life.

Economically, these interactions spurred change as well. Traders entered the region in increasing numbers, contributing to commercial growth. Products like agarwood, elephant ivory, and other valuable items were sought after in India. In contrast, salt was a major import from Bengal. Coinage became more common, and Rudra Singha began issuing coins. He encouraged trade relations with Shah Mahajans and Bar Mudois, signaling a move toward formal economic ties with outside merchants and financiers.

Although Rudra Singha's reign did not expand territorial boundaries, he reasserted control over the Kacharis and Jayantias, who had gained autonomy during the Mughal conflict. He also built alliances with states such as Khyrim or Khairam. His diplomatic initiatives reached as far as Dacca and Tripura, where he formed connections through individuals like Anandiram Medhi, a musician who knew the Tripura Raja. Rudra Singha's final major ambition was to campaign against the Mughals in Bengal, aiming to extend the kingdom's boundaries to the Karatoya River. He attempted to forge a coalition of Hindu rulers from regions like Tripura, Koch Behar, Nadia, Rangpur, and others. The Raja of Amber served as a key voice in this Hindu alliance. However, his plans were cut short by his sudden death on 29th August 1714.

Rudra Singha also endorsed Sakta Hinduism as a strategy to counter the rising influence of Vaishnavism and to foster stronger ties with neighboring Hindu kingdoms. He invited a Sakta priest named Krishnaram Nyayavagish from Navadwip, West Bengal, for spiritual initiation. The priest was promised the custodianship of the Kamakhya Temple. Although Rudra Singha did not live to fulfill this promise, he directed his sons to accept the priest as their guru.

His 18-year rule represents a peak in Ahom statecraft. Alongside advances in art, culture, and economy, his vision of a Pan-Hindu confederacy was remarkable in the context of inter-state diplomacy of the time. Under Rudra Singha, Assam successfully assimilated the best aspects of external civilizations it encountered during the eighteenth century.

2. Review of Literature:

Yasmin Saikia (2004: 252) identifies the Ahoms as warriors led by a Tai king migrating from the east. They eventually became the military and bureaucratic elite of the Ahom kingdom in the upper Brahmaputra Valley during the thirteenth century. This noble class shared governance with the Swargadeo (king) (Guha 1983: 19–20). According to Saikia (2004: 133), the initial Ahoms were male administrators who married local women. From the early sixteenth century, Ahom territorial control began to grow, notably through the conquest of the Chutia kingdom.

By the mid-seventeenth century, the Ahoms had turned the tide in their favor, successfully repelling Mughal advances. At their zenith, their territory stretched from Sadiya to Guwahati (Saikia 2004: 8). Jahnabi Gogoi Nath (2002: 30) notes that the Ahoms evolved from a small polity in the southeast of the Brahmaputra Valley in the early thirteenth century to controlling almost the entire valley by the late seventeenth century.

Initially, Ahom censuses were focused on manpower rather than land (Guha 1983: 34). However, by the mid-seventeenth century, more sophisticated population records were developed to support military and administrative needs (Saikia 2004: 127–28). Guha (1983) also notes that land surveys were absent until the late sixteenth century. Professional land surveyors and scribes were later brought from the Mughal empire. By 1681, the Ahoms had commenced detailed land measurement efforts (Parwez 2018: 133).

3. Definition, Rationale and Scope of Study:

The term "indigenous city" refers to urban areas occupied by native populations. Urban development in this context implies a systematic and deliberate process of city-building. One key factor driving urbanization in early Assam was increased food production. Technological improvements, such as the introduction of iron tools in agriculture, led to surplus yields. This, in turn, enabled the rise of a ruling class, supporting administrative and artisanal occupations in urban settlements.

Urban growth typically evolved from pre-existing rural settlements. A combination of political stability, economic prosperity, and cultural developments fueled this urbanization. Urban centers were designed with both natural and human-made security features to protect these emerging capital cities.

4. Objective of study:

- To bring into the focus of urban development during the ancient period.
- To study the facilities associated with urban development.
- To study the demographic changes, structure, composition of the population.
- To study the impact of urbanization on the society.

5. Research methodology:

This research relies primarily on original sources, including archival materials, company records, and autobiographies from both native and colonial perspectives. Additional information has been gathered from newspapers, books, and scholarly websites, as well as historical archives.

6. Findings:

• Emergence of Planned Urban Centres:

During the initial phase of the Tungkhungia rule, especially under Rudra Singha, deliberate efforts were made to build systematically planned towns. Rangpur emerged as a prominent model of such development. The city was organized with royal residences, temples, tanks (pukhuris), and connecting roads, indicating a shift toward structured governance and urban centralization.

- **Urban Growth as a Tool for Political Control:**

Urbanization during this era also served strategic political purposes. As Mughal threats diminished, monumental constructions like Talatal Ghar and Kareng Ghar were undertaken. These not only reflected royal grandeur but also signified the establishment of permanent centers for administration and governance.

- **Fusion of Cultures and Artistic Advancement:**

Interaction with the Mughals brought in artistic and architectural innovation. Royal attire, manners, and the architecture of temples and palaces absorbed styles from Mughal and Bengali traditions. Structural elements like domes and arches became prominent, and artisans from Bengal and North India contributed with new techniques in crafting bricks, metals, and decorative arts.

- **Population Diversity and Occupational Change:**

The demographic composition of cities became more varied due to the settlement of artisans, traders, war captives, and diplomats. Professions like weaving, pottery, jewelry-making, tailoring, and music gained urban prominence, gradually transforming cities into centers of mixed, non-agrarian occupations.

- **Expansion of Trade and Emergence of a Market Economy:**

Commercial activity flourished during this period. Coin issuance under Rudra Singha pointed to a more monetized economy. Trade with Bengal, Tripura, and adjoining areas grew, involving goods like agarwood, ivory, silk, and salt. Institutions like Shah Mahajans and Bar Mudois played key roles in managing trade and taxation.

- **Monetary Reform and Economic Governance:**

The introduction of coinage was not only an economic measure but a display of sovereign authority. Coins facilitated organized taxation and smoother trade within the urban spaces, laying the groundwork for a standardized economy.

- **Religious Support and Urban Temple Development:**

Rudra Singha actively supported Sakta Hinduism, enhancing the spiritual character of cities. Important festivals such as Durga Puja and Holi were celebrated with royal patronage, while temples and sacred spaces received attention, transforming cities into religious as well as administrative hubs.

- **Administrative Growth and Civic Organization:**

With the expansion of the state's bureaucracy, urban areas were adapted for administrative use. Officials were stationed in or near these towns, where new offices, record houses, and resource centers were built. Land surveys and census efforts helped regulate spatial planning and governance.

- **Cities as Military Outposts:**

Urban centers doubled as defensive strongholds, equipped with military barracks, armories, and garrisons. Especially in areas like Guwahati and Kamrup, this military presence reinforced the kingdom's control over contested territories and safeguarded administrative infrastructure.

- **Diplomatic Engagement and Urban Cosmopolitanism:**

Rudra Singha's court in Rangpur functioned as a center for diplomatic activity, maintaining ties with states like Tripura, Bengal, and Rajputana. Cultural and intellectual exchanges were common, as artists, scholars, and foreign envoys contributed to a more cosmopolitan urban environment.

- **Agriculture as the Urban Backbone:**

Urban development was heavily reliant on the rural surplus made possible by improved iron tools and intensive agriculture. Taxes from fertile areas funded infrastructure, festivals, and state defense, making the agrarian base essential to the growth of towns.

- **Urban Form as a Statement of Sovereignty:**

Towns such as Rangpur symbolized more than habitation—they represented political and cultural might. Palaces, ceremonial ponds, gardens, and venues for art and literature echoed a vision of power, civility, and administrative order, marking cities as embodiments of state authority.

7. CONCLUSION:

The period of early Tungkhungia rule in Assam marked a crucial phase of urban development influenced by political consolidation, economic transformation, and cultural openness. Through the leadership of Rudra Singha, the Ahom kingdom established structured cities, embraced architectural innovations, and pursued diplomatic and economic linkages with

neighboring regions. This legacy of urban planning, cultural fusion, and administrative evolution significantly shaped pre-modern Assam, even as later events posed challenges to its stability

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