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INVISIBLE HANDS: LABOUR AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM

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Keywords	Abstract
<i>Medieval Assam; Labour History; Paik System; Ahom Kingdom; Everyday Life; Agrarian Society; Artisans; Women's Work; Satras; Social History.</i>	Labour and everyday life in medieval Assam, with particular attention to the workers, cultivators, artisans, soldiers, boatmen, fisherfolk, temple servants, women, and servile groups who sustained the region's political and economic order but rarely appear as central actors in conventional histories. Medieval Assam was not a single uniform society; it included the post-Kamarupa regional formations, the Chutiya, Kachari, Koch, and Ahom polities, and the expanding religious worlds of temples and satras. The paper argues that labour in medieval Assam was not merely an economic activity but a foundation of kingship, land control, military organization, ritual authority, and village life. The Ahom system made this especially visible: most adult male subjects owed rotational service to the state in return for access to cultivable land. Yet much labour remained "invisible" because sources such as inscriptions, land grants, and buranjis usually privileged kings, officials, Brahmins, monasteries, and wars. By reading these sources against the grain, this study reconstructs the everyday world of labour in agriculture, craft production, military service, riverine transport, household work, and religious institutions. It also offers a critical review of the limits of available evidence and calls for a more people-centred social history of medieval Assam.



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Introduction

The history of medieval Assam has generally been written through the visible structures of power: dynasties, kings, battles, territorial expansion, religious movements, administrative arrangements, and the rise and fall of kingdoms. These themes are undoubtedly significant, for they help us understand the political formation of the region and the major changes that shaped its historical development. However, such narratives often give limited attention to the everyday world of ordinary people. The lives of those who cultivated the land, produced goods, transported materials, served religious institutions, maintained households, and performed compulsory service for the state remain largely hidden behind the achievements of rulers and elites. In other words, the history of medieval Assam was not made only in royal courts, battlefields, temples, monasteries, or administrative offices; it was also made in fields, villages, rivers, workshops, kitchens, forests, and local markets.

Behind every expression of royal power stood the labour of common people. The authority of kings depended not only on military strength or political legitimacy but also on the productive capacity of the population. Temple wealth was possible because land was cultivated, offerings were prepared, ritual objects were produced, and servants maintained religious establishments. Military success depended on soldiers, boat-builders, blacksmiths, transport workers, food suppliers, and those who constructed roads, forts, and defensive works. Agricultural expansion was made possible by peasants who cleared forests, prepared fields, managed water, and adapted cultivation to the difficult ecological conditions of the Brahmaputra valley. Cultural production also rested upon labour: manuscripts had to be copied, musical and ritual traditions had to be maintained, textiles had to be woven, and spaces of worship and learning had to be sustained.

The groups who performed these tasks included cultivators, artisans, boatmen, fisherfolk, women, domestic servants, temple workers, sattrā functionaries, forest-dependent communities, and state labourers. They were indispensable to society, yet they rarely appear in historical sources as individuals with names, voices, and personal experiences. The available records often mention kings, nobles, priests, officers, saints, and religious beneficiaries, while the people who made the economy function remain unnamed. Their absence from the written record does not mean that their role was minor. Rather, it reveals the elite character of many historical sources. The “ordinary” labouring population formed the material foundation of medieval Assamese life, even though their contribution was frequently absorbed into the larger language of royal achievement, religious merit, or administrative order.

Medieval Assam was also shaped by a highly diverse physical environment. The Brahmaputra valley formed the heart of many political and economic developments, but it was surrounded by hills, forests, wetlands, river islands, and frontier zones. This ecological variety deeply influenced patterns of settlement, agriculture, mobility, and labour. Life in the region required constant



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adjustment to rivers, floods, soil conditions, forests, and shifting channels of communication. The river was both a source of fertility and a source of danger. It supported agriculture, fishing, transport, and trade, but it also caused floods, erosion, and displacement. As a result, labour in medieval Assam was closely tied to environmental adaptation.

Agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, occupied a central position in everyday life. It required the combined work of households and communities. Ploughing, transplanting, harvesting, threshing, storing grain, repairing embankments, and managing water were not isolated activities; they were part of a seasonal rhythm that shaped village society. Cultivation was also connected with settlement expansion. Forests and wetlands had to be transformed into productive land, and this process demanded physical effort, local knowledge, and collective cooperation. The peasant household was therefore not merely a private economic unit. It was part of a wider social and political order in which land, labour, obligation, and authority were closely linked.

During the time of medieval period, the situation of Assam was politically complex. Different kingdoms and regional powers emerged and interacted with one another, including the Ahoms, Chutiyas, Kacharis, Koches, and other local formations. Among these, the Ahom state developed one of the most distinctive systems of labour organization in the region. The paik system connected ordinary households directly to the machinery of the state. Under this system, adult male subjects were required to render service to the state, while also remaining tied to agricultural production. Labour was therefore not simply a matter of personal livelihood; it became an instrument of governance.

The paik system made labour central to the functioning of the Ahom state. could be called upon for military service, construction work, transport, road building, embankment repair, boat making, and other forms of public duty. In return, they were associated with access to land for cultivation. This arrangement linked land rights with service obligations and made the household a site where state power was experienced directly. The demands of the kingdom affected agricultural routines, family responsibilities, and village cooperation. When a man was away performing service, others had to maintain the household economy. Thus, the paik system reveals how deeply political authority entered the everyday lives of ordinary people.

This paper studies these “invisible hands” of medieval Assam: the unnamed labouring groups whose work sustained the social, economic, religious, and political structures of the period. It argues that labour should not be understood merely as an economic activity concerned with production and survival. In medieval Assam, labour was also a social and political force. It shaped relations between rulers and subjects, between religious institutions and local communities, between men and women, and between settled agriculture and the natural environment. Labour determined how people lived, how villages functioned, how states mobilized resources, and how religious and cultural life was maintained.



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By examining agrarian labour, artisanal production, women's work, religious service, riverine activity, domestic work, and state-controlled labour, this study attempts to recover the experiences of those who remained marginal in elite historical narratives. It seeks to shift attention from the palace to the village, from the royal chronicle to the field, from the temple endowment to the workers who sustained it, and from formal administration to everyday obligation. Such an approach does not reject political history; rather, it deepens it by showing that kingdoms were built upon the continuous labour of ordinary people.

In this sense, a study of labour and everyday life allows us to move beyond a ruler-centred understanding of medieval Assam. It helps us see the region not only as a space of kings, saints, wars, and dynasties, but also as a lived world of work, survival, cooperation, hierarchy, and resistance. The history of medieval Assam becomes more complete when the silent contributions of cultivators, artisans, women, boatmen, servants, religious workers, and are brought into view. These invisible hands may not have dominated the written record, but they shaped the everyday reality upon which medieval Assamese society rested.

Importance of the Study

The study of medieval Assam has often centred on dynasties, wars, religious movements, inscriptions, and administrative systems. These themes are important, but they can leave ordinary people in the shadows. The cultivator who cleared land, the paik who built roads and embankments, the fisher who supplied food, the woman who maintained household production, the artisan who made boats, weapons, textiles, and ritual objects, and the servant attached to temples or noble households were all central to the making of medieval Assamese society.

This study is important for three reasons. First, it shifts attention from rulers to producers. Second, it connects labour with everyday life, showing how state power entered ordinary homes, fields, rivers, and workshops. Third, it helps explain why systems that appeared strong, especially the Ahom paik system, later faced social strain and resistance. Labour was not a background detail of medieval Assam; it was the living foundation of the region's economy, polity, and culture.

Research Gap

A major gap in the study of medieval Assam is the limited attention given to labouring groups as historical subjects in their own right. Existing scholarship has discussed land grants, the Ahom administration, the paik system, Neo-Vaishnavism, the Moamoria rebellion, and agrarian relations, but the everyday experiences of workers are often treated indirectly. Women's labour is even more difficult to recover, because formal political records rarely document domestic work, food processing, weaving, childcare, ritual support, and informal agricultural labour.

Another gap lies in the separation between political history and social history. The paik system is often described as an administrative or military institution, but it was also a structure that shaped



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family rhythms, village cooperation, land use, masculinity, hierarchy, and resistance. Similarly, religious institutions such as temples and sattras are usually studied through devotion and theology, but they also depended on land, service, food supply, craft labour, and attached workers.

This paper therefore attempts to bring scattered evidence together and ask a simple but underexplored question: how did labour shape everyday life in medieval Assam?

Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows –

1. To examine the main forms of labour in medieval Assam, especially agrarian, artisanal, military, religious, domestic, and riverine labour.
2. To analyse how the paik system connected land, service, state power, and village life.
3. To identify the social groups whose labour remained underrepresented in royal and religious sources.
4. To explore the relationship between labour, hierarchy, gender, and everyday survival.
5. To critically review the limitations of available sources for writing a people-centred history of medieval Assam.

Methodology

This paper follows a historical-analytical method. It uses secondary scholarship on medieval Assam and reads available source traditions such as inscriptions, copper-plate grants, chronicles, and administrative descriptions as evidence of labour relations. The study is qualitative rather than statistical. Since ordinary workers rarely wrote their own histories, the paper uses a “reading against the grain” approach: instead of accepting elite records only for what they openly celebrate, it asks what kinds of labour must have existed behind royal grants, military campaigns, temple endowments, roads, embankments, boats, and agricultural expansion.

The paper draws especially on discussions of Kamarupa inscriptions, Ahom buranjis, the paik system, agrarian organization, and the later crisis of the Ahom state. It also uses social-historical interpretation to connect formal institutions with everyday practices.

Analysis

1. Medieval Assam as a Labouring Landscape

Medieval Assam must be understood not only as a political or cultural region, but also as a living landscape shaped continuously by labour. Its history unfolded across river valleys, forested tracts, hills, marshes, wetlands, floodplains, and expanding zones of cultivation. The natural environment was not a passive background to human activity; it actively influenced how people



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lived, worked, settled, moved, and organized society. The everyday life of medieval Assam was therefore deeply connected with the physical character of the region. Labour was required not simply to produce food or goods, but also to survive within a landscape marked by rivers, seasonal floods, dense vegetation, shifting soil, and ecological diversity.

The Brahmaputra valley occupied a central place in this world. The Brahmaputra was far more than a river flowing through the region. It was a major artery of communication, movement, economy, and political power. Through it moved people, boats, goods, soldiers, religious ideas, and cultural influences. The river connected settlements and kingdoms, supported fishing and agriculture, and enabled trade and transport. At the same time, it also presented constant challenges. Floods, erosion, changing channels, and waterlogged lands demanded repeated human effort. Communities living near the river had to adjust their agricultural practices, rebuild homes, repair embankments, protect crops, and relocate when necessary. Thus, the river shaped both opportunity and hardship.

Labour in medieval Assam was therefore inseparable from adaptation. People did not merely occupy the landscape; they had to work with it, transform it, and respond to its uncertainties. Cultivators cleared forests to extend agricultural land, prepared fields for rice cultivation, managed water, maintained bunds and embankments, and rebuilt agricultural spaces after floods. Wet rice cultivation, which became central to agrarian life, required careful knowledge of seasons, soil, rainfall, and water flow. It was labour-intensive and often depended on collective effort. Ploughing, transplanting, harvesting, threshing, and storage were not isolated tasks performed by individuals alone, but part of a wider rhythm of household and community labour.

The establishment of settlements was fundamentally a product of labour. Villages, fields, pathways, embankments, ponds, granaries, and houses had to be created and maintained. Building a house involved collecting timber, bamboo, cane, grass, thatch, and other local materials. Maintaining a settlement required regular repair, especially in a region affected by rain, humidity, insects, floods, and river erosion. The labouring landscape of medieval Assam was therefore constantly being remade. It was not fixed once and for all; it required continuous work from generation to generation.

The economy of medieval Assam cannot be understood only through settled agriculture, even though cultivation was extremely important. The region's ecological diversity supported many other forms of labour. Boatmen played a vital role in transport, communication, trade, and warfare. Since rivers and waterways were central to movement, those who knew how to build, steer, repair, and manage boats possessed crucial skills. Fisherfolk contributed to the food economy and had intimate knowledge of rivers, streams, wetlands, and seasonal fish movements. Hunters and gatherers supplied forest products, meat, honey, medicinal plants, wood, cane, and other materials. Elephant catchers and forest workers were also important, especially in a region where elephants had military, economic, and symbolic value.



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These forms of work show that medieval Assam had a mixed and flexible economy. Agriculture, fishing, forest extraction, craft production, animal capture, transport, and service labour existed alongside one another. Many communities may have combined more than one occupation depending on season, location, need, and social position. A household could be involved in cultivation while also depending on fishing, gathering, weaving, livestock care, or occasional service to chiefs, temples, or the state. This wider understanding of labour helps us avoid a narrow view of medieval Assamese society as only an agrarian society. It was agrarian, but it was also riverine, forest-based, artisanal, military, and ritual in character.

The expansion of cultivation was one of the most important historical processes in medieval Assam. Bringing new land under cultivation required physical effort and social organization. Forests had to be cleared, land had to be prepared, water had to be controlled, and settlements had to be established. This process was linked to political authority, religious institutions, and social hierarchy. Rulers and local elites often claimed control over land, while cultivators and labouring groups made that land productive through their work. The spread of agriculture was therefore not merely an economic development; it was also a process through which power entered the landscape.

Copper-plate grants from early Assam, especially those associated with Kamarupa, provide important evidence for understanding this relationship between land, authority, religion, and labour. These inscriptions usually record the donation of land by rulers to Brahmins, temples, or other religious beneficiaries. At first glance, they appear to be documents about royal generosity, religious merit, and legal rights over land. However, when read more carefully, they also reveal the importance of settlement and labour. A grant of land was meaningful only if the land could be identified, occupied, cultivated, and made productive. Behind the formal language of donation stood fields, boundaries, water sources, villages, local inhabitants, and working communities.

The inscriptions often mention boundaries such as rivers, trees, roads, ponds, fields, or neighbouring settlements. These details show that the land being granted was not an abstract space. It belonged to a lived environment already known, used, and marked by people. The presence of boundaries suggests the presence of local knowledge and local labour. Someone had cleared the land, walked the boundaries, used the water, cultivated the soil, or lived near it. Even when the inscriptions do not name cultivators, their existence is implied by the very act of granting land.

The religious character of many land grants also hides the labouring world beneath them. When land was donated to Brahmins or religious institutions, the record usually highlighted the piety of the donor and the rights of the receiver. But the actual value of the grant came from the labour of those who cultivated the land, paid dues, supplied produce, or served the institution. A temple or religious establishment could not survive on land as a mere legal possession. It needed grain, oil, cloth, flowers, vessels, buildings, ritual objects, and daily service. All of these depended on workers. Thus, religious wealth rested on a material base created by labour.



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This is why the language of donation must be read critically. Royal grants often present land as something that a king gives and a religious beneficiary receives. Such a view emphasizes authority from above. But from the perspective of labour history, land was made valuable from below. It was the cultivator who planted and harvested, the artisan who produced necessary tools, the boatman who transported goods, the worker who maintained roads and embankments, and the servant who supported daily religious and domestic life. Without these labouring groups, the land mentioned in inscriptions would have had little practical value.

The “labouring landscape” of medieval Assam therefore refers to both nature and society. It includes rivers, forests, fields, and hills, but also the human effort that transformed and sustained them. It reminds us that the history of the region was built not only through royal conquest or religious patronage, but also through the continuous work of ordinary people. The cultivator bending over a rice field, the fisher casting a net, the boatman navigating the Brahmaputra, the forest worker collecting materials, the artisan making tools, and the labourer repairing embankments were all part of the historical process.

Even when these workers remain unnamed in inscriptions and chronicles, their presence is everywhere implied. Every grant of land assumes cultivation. Every settlement assumes house-building and maintenance. Every temple assumes ritual and material support. Every military campaign assumes transport, weapons, food, and manpower. Every expansion of state power assumes control over labour. To write the history of medieval Assam as a labouring landscape is therefore to bring into view the hidden foundations of its political, economic, and cultural life.

In this sense, medieval Assam was not simply a region ruled by kings or described in inscriptions. It was a region continuously produced by work. Its fields, religious centres, routes, markets, settlements, and political institutions were all shaped by the labour of ordinary people. The landscape itself carried the marks of their effort. Although their names were rarely preserved, their labour made medieval Assamese society possible.

2. Agriculture and the Everyday Economy

Agriculture formed the central foundation of everyday life in medieval Assam. Although the region also depended on fishing, forest products, river transport, craft production, animal rearing, and trade, cultivation remained the most important basis of livelihood for the majority of the population. The household economy, village life, state revenue, religious endowments, and military organization were all closely connected with the production of food. In this sense, agriculture was not only an economic activity; it was the organizing principle of social life. The rhythm of the agricultural seasons shaped work, family responsibilities, village cooperation, festivals, obligations to rulers, and relations with religious institutions.



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Rice cultivation occupied a particularly important place in medieval Assamese society. The ecological conditions of the Brahmaputra valley, with its fertile alluvial soil, abundant rainfall, wetlands, and floodplains, made rice a natural and essential crop. Yet rice cultivation was also highly labour-intensive. It required careful preparation of land, knowledge of water conditions, and coordinated work at different stages of the agricultural cycle. Ploughing the fields, preparing seedbeds, transplanting seedlings, weeding, harvesting, threshing, drying, storing grain, and protecting the crop from animals, pests, floods, and excessive rain all demanded repeated labour.

The agricultural economy therefore depended on both physical effort and local knowledge. Cultivators had to understand the soil, the seasons, the behaviour of rivers, the timing of rainfall, and the risks of flood or drought. A field was not simply a piece of land; it was a space that had to be prepared, watched, repaired, and renewed. Embankments and bunds had to be maintained. Water had to be managed. After floods, fields often required restoration. In riverine areas, erosion or sand deposition could damage agricultural land and force cultivators to adjust. Thus, farming in medieval Assam was not a mechanical routine but a continuous process of adaptation to the environment.

The household was the basic unit of production. Family members worked together to cultivate land, store food, care for animals, prepare tools, and manage domestic needs. Men, women, children, and elders all contributed in different ways. Men may have been more visible in ploughing, service obligations, and public labour, while women played crucial roles in transplanting, processing grain, storing food, weaving, cooking, maintaining the household, and supporting agricultural life. Much of this labour was not formally recorded, but without it the agrarian economy could not function.

However, agriculture was never limited to the individual household alone. Many agricultural activities required cooperation beyond the family. Kinship networks, neighbours, and village communities often became necessary during peak seasons such as transplanting and harvesting. Labour could be shared, exchanged, or organized collectively. The repair of embankments, protection of fields, clearing of land, and management of water resources often demanded community-level effort. In this way, agriculture helped create bonds of cooperation, dependency, and obligation within village society.

Agriculture also connected ordinary people to larger structures of power. Rulers, chiefs, nobles, temples, satras, and officials all depended on agricultural surplus. Land grants to religious beneficiaries had value only because cultivators produced crops from the land. State officials could mobilize people and resources because the village economy generated food and labour. The agrarian world therefore sustained not only households but also political and religious institutions. The everyday work of cultivators made possible the visible achievements of the kingdom.

In the Ahom kingdom, the relationship between agriculture and political authority became especially significant through the paik system. The paik system was a distinctive form of labour



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organization in which adult male subjects owed service to the state. A paik was not simply a peasant in the narrow sense; he was both a cultivator and a servant of the kingdom. His life was divided between working the land for household survival and performing duties required by the state. These duties could include military service, construction work, transport, road building, boat making, fortification, and other forms of public labour.

In return for service, the paik received access to cultivable land, commonly known as gaa mati. This land allowed him and his household to sustain themselves. However, access to land was tied to obligation. The paik's right to cultivate was connected with his duty to serve. This arrangement reveals a key feature of medieval Assamese society: land, labour, and authority were closely bound together. The state did not merely collect revenue from a distance; it organized people's time, work, and movement through service obligations.

The paik system also had a direct impact on the everyday economy of the household. Since paiks were organized into units, the service of one member affected the work of others. When one man was called away for royal duty, the remaining members of the unit or household had to ensure that agricultural production continued. This arrangement was designed to prevent complete disruption of cultivation, but it also meant that state service entered the daily rhythm of rural life. The timing of labour, the availability of workers, and the responsibilities of family members were all shaped by the demands of the kingdom.

This close connection between the state and the village distinguishes the Ahom system from a purely revenue-based model of rule. The Ahom state did not depend only on taxes in money or grain. It depended heavily on the direct mobilization of human labour. The bodies, skills, and time of ordinary men became resources of the state. Agriculture supported this system because it maintained the households from which labour was drawn. At the same time, state service placed pressure on agricultural life by removing workers from the field whenever they were needed for official duties.

The apparent balance between land and service should therefore not be romanticized. On the surface, the paik system may appear as a reciprocal arrangement: the state gave land, and the paik gave service. But the relationship was unequal because the state possessed the power to command labour. The paik's land was not private property in the modern sense. His claim over land depended on his position within the system of service. If he failed to perform duties, resisted authority, or became unavailable for service, his access to land could be affected. Thus, landholding was conditional and deeply tied to political obligation.

The burden of service could vary according to time, place, status, and political circumstances. During periods of war, expansion, construction, or crisis, demands on paiks could increase. Military campaigns required soldiers, transport workers, boatmen, food suppliers, and support labour. Public works required men to build roads, embankments, tanks, and forts. These obligations could disturb



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agricultural schedules and create hardship for households. If labour was demanded during a critical farming season, the pressure on families would have been severe. Women, children, elders, neighbours, or fellow members of the labour unit may have had to compensate for the absence of the adult male worker.

Everyday life in medieval Assam therefore involved constant negotiation between household needs and state demands. The cultivator had to produce enough food for survival, fulfil social and kinship obligations, support religious and community activities, and also remain available for royal service. Farming was never merely a private economic activity; it was embedded in a larger structure of power. The field and the state were connected through the body of the paik.

This arrangement also shaped social discipline. Since the state needed labour, it had an interest in counting, organizing, and supervising people. Officials and local authorities managed groups of paiks, assigned duties, and ensured that service obligations were fulfilled. Labour was therefore a means of administration. To control labour was to control society. The organization of paiks into units made rural people legible to the state and allowed the kingdom to mobilize them for military and economic purposes.

At the same time, agriculture gave ordinary people a certain importance. The state could not function without cultivators. Military power, public works, religious patronage, and elite consumption all depended on agrarian production. This gave labouring households a central place in the structure of medieval Assamese society, even if they did not hold formal power. Their work sustained the kingdom, but their dependence on land and service also made them vulnerable to exploitation.

The everyday economy of medieval Assam was therefore built on a delicate and often unequal relationship between land, labour, household survival, and state authority. Agriculture provided food and stability, but it also tied people to obligations beyond their control. The paik system made this relationship especially visible by linking cultivation with compulsory service. Through it, the state entered the village, the household, and the agricultural calendar. The result was a society in which everyday life was shaped by the demands of both nature and power: the cultivator had to face the river, the field, the season, the family, the village, and the kingdom all at once.

3. The Paik System: Labour as State Power

The paik system was one of the most distinctive and significant institutions of medieval Assam, particularly under the Ahom state. It was not merely an administrative arrangement, nor was it simply a method of military recruitment. It was a broad system through which the state organized labour, controlled population, distributed land, maintained public works, and mobilized men for war. Through this system, the Ahom kingdom transformed the labouring population into a central resource of the state. The strength of the kingdom depended not only on royal authority, noble



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leadership, or military strategy, but also on its ability to command the time, bodies, and skills of ordinary people.

A paik was generally an adult male subject who owed service to the state. His obligation was not occasional or accidental; it was built into the structure of political life. The paik was expected to serve the kingdom when called upon, and in return he was granted access to cultivable land for the maintenance of his household. This arrangement linked land and labour in a direct manner. Land was not simply a private possession separated from political duty. It was connected with service. The right to cultivate was tied to the duty to serve.

The paik system therefore reveals a major feature of Ahom governance: the state drew power from the organized labour of its subjects. Instead of depending entirely on a permanent paid army or a fully monetized revenue system, the Ahom kingdom relied heavily on the rotational service of paiks. This gave the state a flexible and wide-reaching labour force. When military campaigns were necessary, paiks could be mobilized as soldiers, transport workers, boatmen, suppliers, and support staff. When public works were required, they could be called for road construction, embankment repair, tank digging, bridge building, fortification, boat making, and other tasks essential to the functioning of the kingdom.

In this sense, the paik system made labour a direct instrument of state power. The state did not merely rule over land; it ruled through the organization of labour. Roads, embankments, forts, tanks, boats, and military camps were material signs of royal authority, but they were produced by the physical effort of paiks. A king might order the construction of a road, but the road itself came into existence through the work of many labouring men. A military victory might be remembered in chronicles as the achievement of a ruler or general, but behind that victory stood the labour of soldiers, boatmen, blacksmiths, carpenters, food carriers, and countless support workers. The visible achievements of the Ahom state were therefore built upon the less visible labour of its subjects.

The paik occupied a double position in society. He was both a cultivator and a servant of the state. As a cultivator, he worked the land to sustain his family and household. As a state servant, he was available for royal duty whenever required. His life moved between the field and the command of the state. This dual role shaped the everyday economy of medieval Assam. The paik's labour was not fully his own, because a portion of his time and energy belonged to the kingdom. His body, skill, movement, and availability were all treated as resources that could be organized and used by the state.

The system also affected the household. When a paik was called away for duty, his agricultural responsibilities did not disappear. The family still needed food, fields still required care, and seasonal tasks still had to be completed. Other household members, relatives, neighbours, or fellow members of the paik unit had to compensate for his absence. Thus, state service reached beyond the individual



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male worker and affected the entire household. Women, children, elders, and kin networks often bore the indirect burden of paik service, even if they were not formally counted as paiks.

The paik system was usually organized through units and supervised by officials. This organization enabled the state to keep track of labour, assign duties, and mobilize men efficiently. Officers such as Bora, Saikia, and Hazarika supervised groups of paiks and connected local society with higher levels of administration. These officials were responsible for maintaining discipline and ensuring that service obligations were fulfilled. Through them, the state entered village life in a practical and regular manner.

This structure also created hierarchy within labour. Not all paiks performed the same work, and not all enjoyed the same status. Some were engaged in ordinary manual labour or military service, while others were assigned to specialized tasks according to skill or need. Certain groups were associated with crafts, boat-making, metal work, elephant care, transport, or administrative service. Some paiks may have had more favourable positions than others, depending on their role, connections, or proximity to authority. Labour was therefore not uniform. It was divided, ranked, and supervised.

The existence of officers such as bora, saikia, and hazarika shows that the paik system was not simply a loose obligation imposed on villagers. It was a graded administrative structure. A bora supervised a smaller number of men, a saikia supervised a larger unit, and a hazarika supervised still larger groups. This chain of command helped the Ahom state convert local labour into organized state capacity. It allowed the kingdom to respond to war, construction, defence, transport, and other needs without relying exclusively on money wages or voluntary participation.

The system gave the Ahom state considerable strength and resilience. In times of war, the kingdom could mobilize large numbers of men. In a region where river routes, embankments, roads, and forts were crucial, the availability of organized labour was a major advantage. Public works could be undertaken because the state had access to compulsory service. Military campaigns could be sustained because labour was available not only for fighting but also for carrying supplies, building camps, repairing boats, and maintaining communication. The paik system therefore supported both the military and economic foundations of the kingdom.

However, the strength of the system was also its source of tension. Since the state depended heavily on the labour of ordinary people, increased demands could create serious pressure on households. During periods of war, political instability, public construction, or administrative expansion, paiks could be called away more frequently. This disturbed agricultural production and placed additional burdens on families. If service demands became excessive, the balance between household survival and state obligation could break down.



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The system also opened possibilities for exploitation. Officials who controlled paik labour could misuse their authority. Powerful nobles and religious institutions might try to draw labour away from ordinary state service or attach workers to their own establishments. Some paiks may have tried to escape obligations, seek protection under powerful patrons, or move into religious communities to reduce the burden of state service. Such tensions show that the paik system was not a simple or harmonious arrangement. It was a field of negotiation, pressure, and conflict.

The burden of paik service was not experienced equally by all. Ordinary paiks who performed hard manual or military labour faced greater physical demands than those placed in more privileged or specialized roles. Households with fewer working members would have suffered more when adult men were called away. Communities living in frontier or militarily sensitive regions may have faced heavier obligations. Thus, while the system organized society, it also produced inequality within the labouring population.

The paik system also reveals how power worked in everyday life. State power was not limited to royal commands, court politics, or military campaigns. It was felt in the village, in the field, in the household, and in the agricultural calendar. The state could determine when a man left his field, where he worked, what task he performed, and how long he remained in service. This made political authority deeply personal and practical. For ordinary people, the state was not an abstract institution; it appeared as a demand upon labour.

At the same time, the dependence of the Ahom state on paiks gave labour a central historical importance. The paiks were not passive background figures. They made the kingdom function. Without them, roads could not be maintained, embankments could not be repaired, boats could not be built, military campaigns could not be supplied, and agriculture could not continue. The state's power rested upon their work. The apparent glory of the kingdom therefore must be understood as the accumulated result of ordinary labour.

In the long run, the pressures within the paik system contributed to social strain. As administrative demands increased and social divisions became sharper, the system could become oppressive for many ordinary households. The later crises of the Ahom state, including popular unrest and rebellion, cannot be explained only through labour exploitation, but the burden placed on paiks formed an important part of the background. When a system that was meant to organize labour began to overburden the very people who sustained it, it weakened the foundations of state authority.

Thus, the paik system should be understood as both a source of strength and a source of tension. It enabled the Ahom state to command labour, defend territory, build public works, and maintain political control. At the same time, it placed heavy demands on ordinary people and tied household life to state power. The paik was not merely a cultivator, a soldier, or a labourer; he was



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the point at which land, service, authority, and everyday life met. Through him, labour became one of the most important foundations of medieval Assamese state power.

4. Artisans, Specialists, and Skilled Labour

Medieval Assamese society depended not only on cultivators and state labourers, but also on a wide range of artisans and skilled specialists. These workers formed an essential part of the everyday economy. Their labour supplied the tools, vessels, boats, weapons, cloth, ornaments, ritual objects, household goods, and transport equipment required by society. Without them, agriculture, warfare, trade, domestic life, and religious practice could not function properly. Skilled labour therefore occupied a crucial position in medieval Assam, even though artisans rarely appear at the centre of historical narratives.

The artisan world of medieval Assam was diverse. Blacksmiths made agricultural tools, weapons, knives, axes, and other iron implements. Potters produced vessels needed for cooking, storage, ritual use, and everyday domestic life. Weavers created cloth for household use, social exchange, ritual purposes, and identity. Carpenters built houses, boats, carts, agricultural implements, doors, furniture, and structural parts of public buildings. Gold-washers and metal workers contributed to the production of ornaments, ritual objects, and items of elite consumption. Oil-pressers processed oil used for cooking, lamps, medicine, and ritual activity. Leather workers made useful objects from animal hide, while rope makers, bamboo workers, and cane workers supplied materials needed in houses, boats, agriculture, and transport. Makers of weapons, shields, arrows, spears, swords, and other military equipment were also important in a society where warfare and defence were recurring concerns.

These forms of labour show that the economy of medieval Assam was not limited to the production of food. Agriculture may have been the foundation of livelihood, but agriculture itself depended on skilled labour. A cultivator needed ploughs, hoes, sickles, baskets, storage vessels, ropes, cattle equipment, and household tools. These were not naturally available; they had to be made, repaired, and replaced by skilled workers. Similarly, a village required potters, carpenters, metal workers, weavers, and other specialists in order to maintain everyday life. Skilled labour was therefore embedded in the daily functioning of society.

In the Ahom kingdom, the importance of skilled labour was reflected in administrative organization. Some occupational groups were organized under functional divisions or khels. A khel could be associated with a particular form of service, craft, or duty. This suggests that the state recognized specialized skill as a valuable resource. The Ahom administration did not treat all labour as identical. It attempted to identify, classify, organize, and command different kinds of labour according to the needs of the kingdom. Skilled workers could be mobilized for specific purposes, especially when their expertise was needed for warfare, public works, transport, or royal service.



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This organization of skill reveals a close connection between labour and state power. The state required not only soldiers and cultivators but also craftsmen who could supply the material basis of administration and war. A kingdom could not fight effectively without weapons, boats, ropes, carts, armour, shields, and food-processing equipment. It could not build forts, roads, bridges, tanks, houses, or royal structures without carpenters, masons, bamboo workers, and other specialists. It could not maintain ritual and courtly life without metal workers, potters, textile producers, musicians, scribes, and makers of ceremonial objects. Thus, skilled labour supported both the practical and symbolic authority of the state.

Boat-building was especially important in medieval Assam because the region's geography was deeply riverine. The Brahmaputra and its tributaries shaped movement, settlement, communication, trade, and military strategy. In such a landscape, boats were not luxury items; they were necessary instruments of life and power. They carried people, grain, soldiers, weapons, timber, tribute, religious goods, and commercial products. They connected villages, markets, administrative centres, and military posts. During war, boats could be used for troop movement, river defence, supply transport, and naval conflict.

The building of boats required specialized knowledge. Boat-builders had to understand timber, water conditions, balance, strength, shape, and local river behaviour. They needed carpentry skills, knowledge of joining and fastening, and cooperation with rope makers, woodcutters, iron workers, and labourers. The production of a boat was therefore a collective process involving several types of skill. When chronicles mention river campaigns or military movement by water, they often focus on commanders and battles. Yet behind such events stood boat-builders and other workers whose labour made movement possible.

Weapon production was another important area of skilled labour. Medieval Assam witnessed frequent conflicts among regional powers and also faced external invasions. Defence and warfare required swords, spears, shields, arrows, bows, guns in later periods, armour, and various military supplies. These objects depended on blacksmiths, iron workers, carpenters, leather workers, rope makers, and other specialists. A weapon was not only a symbol of power; it was the product of technical knowledge and manual skill. The strength of an army therefore rested not only on courage or leadership but also on the productive labour of craftsmen.

The importance of skilled labour can also be seen in construction and public works. Roads, bridges, embankments, tanks, forts, houses, granaries, and religious buildings required different kinds of expertise. In flood-prone areas, embankments and raised structures demanded practical knowledge of land and water. Bamboo, cane, timber, thatch, clay, and other local materials had to be selected and used properly. Such work involved artisans as well as general labourers. The visible structures of settlement and state authority were thus built through combined skill and physical effort.



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Textile production was central to everyday life in medieval Assam. Weaving was closely associated with household labour, especially women's labour, and it carried both practical and cultural value. Cloth was needed for clothing, bedding, ritual use, gift exchange, and social identity. In Assamese society, weaving became deeply connected with domestic skill and feminine labour. Women's work in spinning, preparing thread, weaving, dyeing, and maintaining textiles formed a vital part of the household economy. Although such work was often not recorded as formal labour, it was essential for survival and social life.

The production of cloth also linked the household with wider society. Textiles could be exchanged, offered in ritual contexts, given as gifts, or used to mark status and community identity. The labour of weaving therefore cannot be dismissed as merely domestic. It was productive, cultural, and economic at the same time. Like many forms of women's labour, it became invisible because it took place within or near the household rather than in the formal institutions of state or market.

Pottery and metal work also sustained both ordinary and ritual life. Earthen vessels were needed for cooking, storing grain, carrying water, preparing food, and performing rituals. Metal objects were used in agriculture, worship, warfare, ornamentation, and domestic activity. Temples and sattras required lamps, bells, vessels, images, musical instruments, and ritual implements. These objects are sometimes admired as religious or artistic items, but they were also products of labour. Behind every ritual vessel or ornament stood a craftsperson's material knowledge and skill.

The work of gold-washers is also significant in the Assamese context. Assam was known for natural resources, including gold obtained from river sands in some areas. Gold-washing required patience, technical knowledge, and familiarity with riverbeds and sediment. Such labour contributed to ornamentation, elite consumption, religious donation, and political display. Yet gold-washers themselves generally remained socially and historically marginal, while the objects produced from their labour gained prestige.

The invisibility of artisans comes largely from the nature of historical sources. Chronicles and royal records often mention kings, wars, officials, alliances, and religious patrons. They may describe battles, buildings, donations, or ceremonies, but they rarely name the workers who made these possible. A chronicle may celebrate a military victory without mentioning the blacksmiths who forged weapons or the boat-builders who enabled troop movement. A religious text may praise a temple, idol, manuscript, or ritual object without recording the potter, metal worker, carpenter, painter, or weaver who produced the material base of worship.

This silence does not mean that artisans were unimportant. On the contrary, their absence from the record shows how elite writing often separated achievement from production. The completed object, whether a weapon, boat, temple, road, or cloth, could be associated with a king, noble, saint, or donor. The labour process behind it disappeared. A labour history must therefore reconnect visible



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achievements with hidden production. It must ask who made the tools, who built the boats, who forged the weapons, who wove the cloth, who shaped the vessels, and who repaired the material world of everyday life.

Artisans also occupied complex social positions. Some may have been respected for their skill, while others belonged to communities ranked lower in social hierarchy. Skill did not always translate into high status. In many traditional societies, people who produced essential goods could still remain socially subordinate. This contradiction is important: the economy depended on artisans, but prestige often flowed to rulers, priests, nobles, and patrons rather than to producers. Medieval Assam was no exception to this pattern.

The organization of occupational groups under the state could provide recognition, but it could also mean control. When skilled workers were classified into service groups, their labour became easier for the state to command. A boat-builder, blacksmith, or carpenter might be valued, but his skill could also bind him to official obligations. Skilled labour was therefore both a resource and a form of dependency. The artisan's knowledge gave him importance, but the state's need for that knowledge could limit his freedom.

The study of artisans and specialists helps us broaden the meaning of labour in medieval Assam. Labour was not only agricultural or military. It included technical knowledge, inherited skill, bodily discipline, environmental understanding, and creative production. A boat required design; a weapon required metallurgy; a textile required patience and aesthetic sense; a ritual vessel required both functional and symbolic understanding. These forms of labour shaped the material culture of medieval Assamese society.

Therefore, artisans must be placed at the centre of any serious discussion of everyday life. They connected the field to the household, the household to the market, the market to the state, and the state to war and ritual. Their work made possible the ordinary and extraordinary activities of society. Medieval Assam's economy, religious life, military capacity, and cultural world all depended on skilled hands.

The artisans and specialists of medieval Assam were among the most important "invisible hands" of the period. They produced the material objects through which society lived, worshipped, fought, travelled, and remembered itself. Their names may not appear frequently in chronicles or inscriptions, but their labour is present in every tool, boat, weapon, cloth, vessel, building, and ritual object. To recover their role is to make the history of medieval Assam more complete, more social, and more faithful to the realities of everyday life.

5. Women's Labour and Domestic Production

Women's labour in medieval Assam is one of the most important yet least visible aspects of social and economic history. The historical sources available for the medieval period generally speak



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more clearly about kings, nobles, priests, saints, officials, military leaders, and male subjects than about women's everyday work. When women appear in formal records, they are often royal women, elite patrons, wives of important men, or figures connected with religious and political events. Ordinary women, especially those belonging to cultivating, artisan, fishing, forest, and service communities, rarely appear as named individuals. Yet their labour was essential to the survival of households, the functioning of villages, and the continuity of society.

The invisibility of women in historical records should not be mistaken for inactivity. Rather, it shows the limits of the sources and the gendered nature of historical writing. Much of women's work took place within the household or near the household, and because it was considered part of "domestic duty," it was often not recorded as economic labour. However, the household itself was a major site of production in medieval Assam. Food was processed, cloth was woven, children were raised, animals were cared for, seeds were preserved, grain was stored, rituals were performed, and tools and materials were maintained within the domestic sphere. The organisation and continuity of these activities were sustained largely through the labour, skills, and expertise of women, whose contributions formed an indispensable foundation of everyday economic and social life.

In an agrarian society like medieval Assam, women's work was closely connected with agriculture. Although men may have been more visible in ploughing and formal state service, women contributed in many other stages of agricultural production. They may have helped in transplanting, weeding, harvesting, drying grain, threshing, winnowing, storing produce, preparing seeds, and processing food. These tasks required skill, patience, and knowledge of the agricultural cycle. The success of cultivation depended not only on work done in the field but also on the labour performed before and after harvesting. Grain had to be cleaned, dried, stored safely, protected from moisture and pests, and converted into food. These activities were essential to household survival.

Women also played a major role in food preparation and preservation. Cooking was not a simple domestic routine; it was part of the daily reproduction of labour. The household could work only if food was prepared, fuel was collected, water was brought, and meals were organized according to the needs of family members. In a society where heavy agricultural and service labour was common, food preparation was directly connected with productive life. Women's labour in the kitchen sustained the workers in the field, the men called for service, the children who would become future workers, and the elderly who preserved family knowledge and social memory.

Child care was another essential form of labour. Raising children involved feeding, cleaning, teaching, protecting, and socializing them into the practices of the household and community. This work ensured the continuity of family labour and social life. It was reproductive labour in the broadest sense: it reproduced the household, the community, and the labouring population. Yet because it did not produce a visible commodity like grain, cloth, or metal goods, it was often ignored



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in formal historical accounts. A labour history must recognize child care as a necessary part of the economy rather than a purely private responsibility.

Women were also involved in livestock care. Cattle, goats, pigs, poultry, and other domestic animals contributed to food, agriculture, manure, transport, ritual, and exchange. Caring for animals required feeding, cleaning, guarding, milking where applicable, and managing their use in household life. Such work often blended with other domestic tasks, making it difficult to separate one form of labour from another. This blending is one reason women's work becomes invisible: it was continuous, varied, and spread across the day rather than confined to a single named occupation.

Weaving held special significance in Assamese society and deserves particular attention. Cloth was a basic necessity, but it was also much more than that. It carried social, cultural, ritual, and emotional value. Weaving required technical knowledge: preparing thread, operating the loom, selecting patterns, maintaining tension, producing durable cloth, and sometimes dyeing or decorating textiles. In many Assamese households, weaving became closely associated with women's skill and identity. It was a sign of discipline, creativity, and household competence.

The cloth produced by women served many purposes. It clothed the family, supplied bedding and household needs, and could be used in ritual offerings, gift exchange, marriage relations, hospitality, and social recognition. Textiles could express respect, affection, status, and community identity. Thus, women's weaving connected the household to the wider social world. It was not merely domestic production for private use; it participated in exchange, ritual, and cultural life.

Weaving also shows how economic value can be hidden inside cultural practice. Because cloth production was often done within the household, it may not always have been treated as "formal" labour in the same way as state service or craft production under official organization. Yet the material value of cloth was undeniable. Without women's textile labour, households would have had to depend more heavily on external exchange. Women's weaving therefore reduced household dependence, strengthened domestic economy, and contributed to social stability.

Women's labour was also important in brewing and food processing. In many communities of Assam and the wider Northeast, brewing had social, ritual, and domestic significance. It required knowledge of grains, fermentation, storage, and occasion-specific use. Such work formed part of women's productive knowledge, even when it was not acknowledged by elite records. Similarly, the preparation of rice, oil, vegetables, fish, preserved foods, and ritual meals required continuous labour and practical expertise.

Ritual activity also depended on women's work. Household rituals, life-cycle ceremonies, seasonal observances, offerings, and community events required preparation. Women often cleaned spaces, prepared food, arranged materials, wove or supplied cloth, maintained purity practices according to custom, and participated in devotional activities. Religious life did not take place only



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in temples or sattras; it also existed within the household. Women's ritual labour helped maintain the moral and cultural order of family and community.

The burden of women's labour likely increased during periods when men were away on paik service. In the Ahom system, adult male subjects could be called for state duties such as military service, construction, transport, or public works. When men were absent, the household still had to function. Fields needed attention, food had to be produced and stored, children and elders had to be cared for, animals had to be managed, and social obligations had to continue. Women therefore carried not only their regular responsibilities but also additional burdens created by state demands on male labour.

This connection between paik service and women's work is important because it shows that the state affected women even when they were not formally counted as paiks. The absence of men from the household could shift labour responsibilities onto women, making them indirect participants in the system of state labour. The kingdom's demand for male service was sustained partly by the unpaid and unrecorded labour of women who maintained the household during male absence. In this way, women's domestic work supported the functioning of the state.

Women also contributed to social continuity. They preserved household routines, transmitted skills, taught children, maintained kinship ties, prepared for festivals and ceremonies, and upheld everyday moral practices. Their labour was not only physical but also emotional and organizational. Managing a household required planning, memory, discipline, and negotiation. Women had to balance food supply, clothing needs, family relations, ritual duties, and seasonal work. This kind of labour is often difficult to measure, but it is central to everyday life.

The invisibility of women's labour is therefore a problem of historical interpretation. Traditional histories often treat political events, wars, dynastic changes, and formal institutions as the main content of history. Domestic and reproductive labour is pushed into the background, as if it were natural, private, or outside the economy. But this separation is misleading. The household was not outside the economy; it was one of its foundations. Labour performed inside the household made labour outside the household possible.

A genuine history of medieval Assam must therefore expand the meaning of labour. Labour should include not only ploughing, fighting, building, or crafting, but also cooking, weaving, caring, storing, cleaning, raising children, processing grain, managing animals, and maintaining ritual life. These activities sustained the material and social reproduction of society. They were essential to the functioning of agriculture, the paik system, religious institutions, and village life.

Recognizing women's labour also changes how we understand power. Women may not always have held formal authority in the state, but their work supported the structures of power that governed society. At the same time, women's knowledge and labour gave them influence within the



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household and community. Their control over food, cloth, care, and domestic organization made them central to everyday survival. This importance, however, did not necessarily protect them from subordination. Like many labouring groups, women could be indispensable and yet undervalued.

The women labour in medieval Assam was both invisible and foundational. It was invisible because formal records rarely named it, counted it, or treated it as economic activity. It was foundational because everyday life could not continue without it. Agriculture, household survival, textile production, ritual life, child care, food preparation, and social continuity all depended on women's work. To write the history of medieval Assam without women's labour is to leave out one of the deepest structures of society. A people-centred history must therefore bring women's domestic and productive labour into the centre of analysis, where it belongs.

6. Religious Institutions and Labour

Religious institutions in medieval Assam were not only centres of faith, worship, and spiritual instruction; they were also important centres of economic activity and social organization. Temples, monasteries, and later Neo-Vaishnavite satras played a major role in shaping local society. They received land grants, controlled resources, employed or depended upon different kinds of workers, organized ritual activity, and influenced patterns of settlement and authority. To understand medieval Assamese society only through kings and political institutions would therefore be incomplete. Religious institutions formed another major space where labour was organized, used, and given meaning.

Temples depended on labour in many visible and invisible ways. A temple was not simply a sacred structure where worship took place. It required land, buildings, offerings, ritual objects, food, water, lamps, flowers, music, cleaning, maintenance, and regular service. Priests performed rituals, but many others contributed to the functioning of temple life. Cooks prepared food and offerings. Cleaners maintained the ritual and physical cleanliness of the sacred space. Musicians and dancers participated in devotional and ceremonial performances. Artisans made lamps, vessels, images, musical instruments, textiles, and ornaments. Cultivators worked on lands attached to the temple or supplied produce. Servants carried out daily tasks that allowed the institution to function smoothly.

Land was central to the economic base of religious institutions. Many temples and Brahmanical establishments received land through royal or elite donations. Such grants were often presented as acts of piety, religious merit, or royal generosity. However, donated land became valuable only when it was cultivated and managed. The grain, oil, fruits, flowers, and other produce needed for ritual and daily maintenance came from labouring people. Thus, behind the religious language of donation stood a material world of fields, workers, water resources, storage, transport, and management.



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The same applies to *sattras*, which became particularly important with the spread of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. The *sattr* was not merely a place of worship; it was a religious, cultural, educational, and social institution. It organized devotional practice, collective singing, performance, manuscript production, teaching, and community discipline. It also provided a space where people could gather around shared religious identity. However, the *sattr*'s spiritual life depended on material support. Buildings had to be constructed and repaired. Food had to be grown, collected, cooked, and distributed. Manuscripts had to be copied and preserved. Musical instruments had to be made and maintained. Ritual objects, textiles, seats, masks, and performance materials required skilled labour.

The Neo-Vaishnavite *sattr* tradition created new forms of community and devotion, but these communities were sustained by everyday work. The devotional world of *naam-kirtan*, *bhaona*, manuscript reading, and collective worship did not exist apart from labour. Singers, drummers, performers, mask-makers, manuscript copyists, cooks, cleaners, cultivators, and attendants all helped maintain the religious and cultural life of the institution. The *sattr* was therefore both sacred and social, devotional and material.

Sattras also influenced local society by organizing people into networks of religious affiliation. They could shape moral behaviour, social relations, cultural practices, and patterns of patronage. Some individuals and groups became attached to religious establishments as disciples, residents, servants, cultivators, performers, or dependents. For some, the *sattr* offered spiritual belonging and community. For others, it may also have offered protection, status, or an alternative social space. In a society where state service and labour obligations were significant, religious institutions could sometimes become places where people sought relief from certain worldly pressures.

This connection between religious institutions and labour becomes especially important in relation to the Ahom state and the *paik* system. Since the state depended on the labour of *paiks*, any movement of people toward religious establishments could affect the state's control over labour. Some people may have attempted to attach themselves to temples or *sattras* to reduce or escape state obligations. Religious institutions, especially when they accumulated followers and resources, could therefore become significant social forces. They were not isolated from politics; they interacted with state authority, local elites, and ordinary people.

The later conflicts involving the Moamoria community show how religious institutions could become spaces of social organization and resistance. The Moamorias were connected with the Mayamara *sattr*, and their conflict with the Ahom state reflected not only religious tensions but also deeper social and political pressures. The Moamoria rebellion cannot be explained by religion alone. It involved issues of status, oppression, labour burden, social exclusion, and resentment against the ruling order. This example shows that religious communities could provide a framework through which marginalized or dissatisfied groups organized themselves.



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Religious institutions therefore had a double character. On one hand, they could support existing authority by receiving royal patronage, legitimizing rulers, and participating in social hierarchy. On the other hand, they could also become spaces where alternative loyalties were formed. A person's attachment to a sattrā or religious community might become as important as his relationship to the state. When religious identity combined with social grievance, it could produce powerful forms of collective action. Thus, temples and sattras were not merely places of worship; they were active institutions within the wider social and political life of medieval Assam.

Labour within religious institutions was also deeply hierarchical. Priests, religious heads, and spiritual leaders held authority, while servants, cooks, cleaners, cultivators, and other workers performed necessary but less prestigious tasks. Artisans produced ritual objects, but the prestige often went to the donor, priest, or institution rather than the maker. Cultivators supported temple or sattrā lands, but their names were rarely preserved in religious records. This pattern reflects a larger problem in medieval history: the sacred object or institution becomes visible, while the labour that sustains it remains hidden.

The production and preservation of manuscripts also depended on skilled labour. Religious teachings, songs, dramas, genealogies, and commentaries had to be copied by scribes. Manuscript production required writing materials, ink, training, time, and careful attention. It was intellectual labour as well as manual labour. The survival of religious and literary traditions depended on such workers. Yet scribes and copyists often remain secondary in historical narratives, even though they played a major role in transmitting culture.

Music and performance also required labour. Neo-Vaishnavite religious culture in Assam placed great importance on devotional singing, drama, and performance traditions. These activities demanded training, rehearsal, discipline, instruments, costumes, and performance spaces. Drummers, singers, actors, mask-makers, costume makers, and teachers all contributed to the cultural life of religious institutions. Such labour was not merely entertainment; it was a form of devotion, education, and community formation.

Food labour was equally important. Religious institutions needed food for offerings, festivals, residents, guests, and collective gatherings. This involved cultivation, collection of produce, storage, cooking, serving, and cleaning. Women and lower-status workers may have contributed significantly to such tasks, though formal records may not name them. The act of feeding a religious community required continuous labour behind the devotional surface.

Buildings and sacred spaces also had to be maintained. Temples, prayer halls, kitchens, storehouses, residential quarters, and performance spaces required construction and repair. In Assam's climate, bamboo, timber, thatch, and other materials needed regular replacement. Floods, rain, humidity, and insects could damage structures. Thus, religious institutions required constant



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maintenance work. Sacred space was not created once; it had to be repeatedly renewed through labour.

This relationship between religion and labour is crucial because it changes how we understand spiritual authority. Religious life appears elevated, sacred, and symbolic, but it rests upon ordinary work. A temple bell, a manuscript, a ritual meal, a devotional performance, a sattrā building, or a religious festival all depended on many forms of labour. The sacred world was built, fed, cleaned, sung, copied, cultivated, and maintained by human hands.

Recognizing this does not reduce religion to economics. Rather, it gives a fuller understanding of religious life. Faith and devotion were real, but they were expressed through material practices. People worshipped through food, song, cloth, lamps, buildings, manuscripts, and service. All of this required labour. In medieval Assam, the spiritual and the material were deeply connected.

A labour-centred view also helps us see the role of ordinary people in religious history. Religious change was not shaped only by saints, preachers, kings, or texts. It was also shaped by the communities who gathered, sang, performed, cooked, cultivated, copied, donated, cleaned, and maintained institutions. The spread and survival of religious traditions depended on these everyday contributions.

The temples and sattras were central to medieval Assamese life not only because they shaped belief, but also because they organized labour and resources. They were spiritual centres, but they were also economic and social institutions. Their sacred authority rested on land, food, craft production, service, performance, and maintenance. The study of religious institutions therefore reveals another important group of “invisible hands” in medieval Assam: the priests, monks, cultivators, cooks, cleaners, artisans, musicians, dancers, scribes, servants, and devotees whose work sustained the religious world. Without their labour, the sacred institutions of medieval Assam could not have existed.

7. Servile and Marginal Labour

Medieval Assam, like many other pre-modern societies, contained groups whose labour was essential but whose social position was weak or subordinated. These groups included servile workers, dependents attached to noble households, labourers connected with temples or religious institutions, people serving officials, and communities placed low in social or ritual hierarchy. Their work supported the everyday functioning of society, yet their status often remained inferior. They were needed by the economy, but they were not necessarily respected by elite social order. This contradiction is central to understanding labour and everyday life in medieval Assam.

Servile labour refers to forms of work performed under conditions of dependency, limited freedom, or social subordination. Such labour did not always resemble slavery in a single rigid form. Instead, it could appear in many degrees: household service, temple service, bonded dependence,



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hereditary occupation, forced or semi-forced labour, and attachment to officials, chiefs, nobles, or religious establishments. Some people may have worked in elite households as servants, attendants, cleaners, carriers, cooks, guards, or agricultural dependents. Others may have served temples, sattras, or official residences by performing daily tasks necessary for maintenance and ritual life.

The existence of such groups reminds us that medieval Assamese society was not made only of free cultivators and state servants. It also contained people whose labour was controlled by powerful households, religious institutions, or administrative authorities. Their dependency could be economic, social, ritual, or political. A person attached to a noble household might receive food, shelter, or protection, but this relationship could also restrict freedom. A worker attached to a temple might participate in sacred service, but his or her position could remain low in the hierarchy of the institution. Thus, dependency often combined survival with subordination.

Many labouring communities occupied marginal positions in the social order while remaining central to economic life. Fisherfolk, potters, weavers, boatmen, gold-washers, hunters, leather workers, forest dwellers, bamboo and cane workers, and other occupational groups supplied goods and services without which society could not function. Fisherfolk provided an important source of food in a riverine and wetland environment. Potters produced vessels used in cooking, storage, ritual, and domestic life. Weavers supplied cloth for household use, exchange, and ceremonial purposes. Boatmen enabled transport, communication, trade, and military movement. Gold-washers contributed to wealth, ornamentation, and ritual donation. Forest communities supplied timber, cane, bamboo, honey, medicinal plants, animals, and other resources.

Despite their importance, many of these groups were placed at the margins of prestige. Social value was not always determined by economic usefulness. A community could be indispensable and yet ritually or socially ranked low. Work involving manual labour, bodily exertion, river work, forest collection, animal products, clay, leather, or other materials might be treated as inferior by elite groups, even when the whole society depended upon it. This shows how hierarchy shaped the recognition of labour. The more necessary a form of work was, the more invisible it could become when performed by lower-status groups.

The category of “invisible hands” is especially relevant in the case of servile and marginal labour. These groups were visible in the economy because their work was everywhere. They produced food, moved goods, made vessels, carried messages, repaired materials, supplied forest products, maintained ritual spaces, and performed household services. Yet they were invisible in terms of prestige, memory, and representation. Elite records rarely preserved their voices, experiences, desires, or grievances. They appear only indirectly, often as occupational categories, dependents, taxable groups, service groups, or communities requiring control.



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This invisibility was produced by the nature of historical sources. Royal chronicles, inscriptions, land grants, and religious texts were usually written from the perspective of rulers, elites, donors, priests, monks, or administrators. Such sources were concerned with authority, legitimacy, donation, conquest, genealogy, religious merit, and social order. They had little reason to record the inner lives of servants, fishers, potters, weavers, boatmen, or forest workers. When such people appear, it is often because the state needed their labour, the temple needed their service, or their actions disturbed the expected order.

For example, boatmen may become visible in relation to military campaigns, river transport, or official movement. Fisherfolk may appear in relation to food supply, taxation, or control of water resources. Potters and artisans may be implied through ritual vessels, household goods, or temple objects. Forest communities may appear when the state seeks elephants, timber, land expansion, or frontier control. In each case, the labouring group appears not as a full historical subject but as a resource, problem, or function. Their humanity is hidden behind their usefulness.

Servile and marginal labour also played an important role in noble and official households. The homes of elites required attendants, cooks, cleaners, guards, transport workers, animal handlers, and domestic servants. A noble's prestige was partly maintained through the labour of others. Food had to be prepared, clothing maintained, guests received, animals cared for, messages carried, and domestic spaces managed. The comfort and status of elite households therefore depended on subordinated workers whose names were rarely recorded. The visible dignity of the noble rested upon the invisible work of servants.

Religious institutions also depended on marginal labour. Temples and satras required workers to clean spaces, cook food, carry water, cultivate land, prepare offerings, maintain buildings, and assist in rituals. Some of these tasks may have been performed by low-status groups or dependents attached to the institution. While religious texts might emphasize devotion, purity, and spiritual merit, the everyday maintenance of sacred spaces required labour that was often physically demanding and socially undervalued. The sacred world was sustained not only by priests and monks but also by servants and labourers.

The position of forest communities deserves special attention. Medieval Assam included extensive forested regions and frontier zones where many communities lived by hunting, gathering, shifting cultivation, animal capture, timber work, and the collection of forest products. These groups were often viewed from the perspective of settled agrarian society as marginal or peripheral. Yet they supplied resources that were vital to the wider economy. Timber, bamboo, cane, elephants, medicinal plants, honey, wax, and other forest products were important for construction, warfare, ritual, and everyday life. The boundary between settled agriculture and forest life was not fixed; it was a zone of exchange, conflict, incorporation, and negotiation.



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Gold-washers similarly represent a form of labour that was economically valuable but socially underrepresented. Extracting gold from river sands required specialized skill and patient work. The gold that entered elite ornaments, ritual donations, or royal display carried prestige, but the labour of those who collected it remained obscure. This pattern is common in societies based on hierarchy: prestige attaches to the object and its owner, while the producer disappears.

Marginal labour was not always passive. Subordinated groups could negotiate, resist, migrate, seek protection, attach themselves to religious institutions, or participate in collective unrest. Their options were shaped by social position, local power relations, ecological conditions, and political circumstances. Later conflicts in Assam show that groups considered socially low or marginal could become historically significant when grievances accumulated. Even when records do not fully preserve their voices, moments of unrest reveal that ordinary and subordinated people had agency.

To reconstruct the history of servile and marginal labour, historians must use indirect methods. Since these groups rarely left written records of their own, their history must be recovered through scattered references in chronicles, inscriptions, land grants, religious literature, administrative descriptions, oral traditions, occupational practices, and the logic of material life. If a temple existed, workers must have maintained it. If boats moved armies, boatmen and boat-builders must have laboured. If land was granted, cultivators must have made it productive. If elite households displayed wealth, servants and producers must have supported that wealth. Such reasoning allows us to restore the presence of people whom the sources do not fully name.

However, this reconstruction must be careful. It should not invent details without evidence, but it should also not accept silence as absence. The absence of names is itself a historical fact. It shows how power shaped memory. Those who controlled writing-controlled visibility. Those who laboured without writing remained present in material life but absent from formal history. A labour-centred approach attempts to correct this imbalance by asking what kinds of work were necessary for recorded events and institutions to exist.

The study of servile and marginal labour also challenges a romantic view of medieval society. It reminds us that everyday life was marked not only by cooperation and community, but also by hierarchy, dependency, inequality, and compulsion. The economy required many kinds of work, but not all workers received equal recognition or freedom. Some people worked under obligation. Others were tied to patrons, institutions, or hereditary occupations. Some were valued for their usefulness but denied social honour. These inequalities were part of the structure of medieval Assamese life.

At the same time, these marginal groups were not outside history. They were central to it. Fisherfolk sustained the food economy. Potters and weavers supplied domestic and ritual needs. Boatmen connected settlements and enabled political movement. Forest communities provided resources and knowledge of difficult landscapes. Servile workers maintained elite and religious



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households. Gold-washers contributed to wealth and prestige. Their work entered every layer of society, from the kitchen to the temple, from the river to the battlefield, from the village to the court.

The servile and marginal labour formed one of the most important hidden foundations of medieval Assam. These groups were often socially subordinated, ritually devalued, or historically unnamed, but their labour was indispensable. They were visible in the economy but invisible in prestige. Their hands fed society, supplied goods, maintained communication, supported religious life, and served political authority. A genuine social history of medieval Assam must therefore bring them into view, not as background figures, but as active contributors to the making of everyday life.

8. Labour, Resistance, and Crisis

The paik system was one of the major foundations of the Ahom state. For a long period, it helped the kingdom expand, defend itself, build public works, and maintain political authority over a wide region. By organizing adult male subjects into units of service, the Ahom state gained access to soldiers, cultivators, transport workers, construction labourers, boatmen, artisans, and other service groups. This system gave the kingdom a remarkable capacity to mobilize labour without depending entirely on a money-based revenue system or a permanent paid army. In times of war, the state could call upon paiks for military service. In times of construction or repair, it could use them for roads, embankments, tanks, forts, boats, and other public works. In this way, the labouring population became the backbone of Ahom political power.

However, the very system that strengthened the Ahom state also produced tensions over time. The paik system depended on a delicate balance between land, labour, household survival, and state demand. A paik received access to cultivable land, but in return he owed service to the kingdom. This arrangement could function effectively as long as obligations remained manageable and agricultural production was not severely disturbed. But when state demands increased, when officials became oppressive, or when society became more complex, the balance began to weaken. The paik's household had to survive while also meeting the demands of royal service. If too much labour was taken away from cultivation, family life and village production suffered.

As the Ahom kingdom grew, the needs of the state also expanded. A larger kingdom required more administration, more military defence, more communication, more construction, and more control over people and resources. This meant greater demand for labour. Wars, internal conflicts, frontier management, and public works placed heavy pressure on paiks. The state needed their bodies and skills, but the household also needed the same labour for cultivation and survival. The conflict between these two demands became increasingly serious.

The growth of social and economic complexity also placed strain on the paik system. Medieval Assamese society was not static. Over time, exchange expanded, social divisions became sharper, religious institutions gained influence, and elite households accumulated power. Monetized forms of



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exchange and market-related activities developed in some areas, even though the economy remained largely agrarian. A rigid labour-service system, based on compulsory service and tied landholding, could become difficult to maintain in such changing conditions. People who found opportunities outside direct state service might try to avoid or reduce their obligations.

Another source of tension came from the competition for labour. The Ahom state needed paiks for military, administrative, and public works, but nobles, officials, and religious institutions also needed labour. Powerful nobles required attendants, agricultural workers, craftsmen, and household servants. Temples and sattras needed cultivators, cooks, cleaners, performers, scribes, and service groups. As these institutions grew, they could draw labour away from direct state control. Some workers may have become attached to noble households or religious establishments, either by compulsion, patronage, devotion, or the hope of protection. This created tension because the state's authority depended upon its ability to command labour.

Religious institutions, particularly sattras, could become alternative centres of loyalty and organization. For many people, attachment to a sattra provided spiritual belonging, social identity, and community support. In some cases, it may also have offered a way to escape or soften the burden of state labour obligations. When large numbers of people gathered around religious institutions, the state could view them with suspicion, especially if they seemed to weaken the supply of paiks. Thus, religion and labour were connected not only in worship and ritual, but also in questions of political control.

The pressure on paiks appears to have increased especially in the eighteenth century, a period marked by growing instability within the Ahom kingdom. Court politics, factional struggles, elite competition, administrative strain, and social tensions weakened the older balance of the system. Ordinary paiks and lower-status groups bore much of the burden. They were expected to serve the state, support elite demands, maintain household production, and accept social subordination. When these obligations became excessive, resentment deepened.

Resistance did not always begin as open rebellion. It could take quieter forms: evasion of service, flight from assigned areas, attachment to religious institutions, refusal to cooperate, concealment of labour, or negotiation with local authorities. Such everyday forms of resistance are difficult to trace in formal sources because they were often not recorded unless they became serious enough to trouble the state. However, the very need for administrative supervision suggests that the state had to constantly manage, discipline, and recover labour. People did not always submit passively to demands placed upon them.

The Moamoria rebellion represents one of the most dramatic expressions of crisis in late medieval Assam. It cannot be explained by labour grievances alone, because it was a complex movement involving religious, political, ethnic, social, and economic tensions. The Moamorias were



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associated with the Mayamara sattra, and their conflict with the Ahom state reflected the strained relationship between royal authority and a religious community with a large following, including many socially subordinated groups. The rebellion also involved resentment against elite domination, humiliation, oppression, and unequal status.

The labour grievances formed an important part of the social background of the rebellion. Many of the people connected with the movement came from groups that experienced the burden of service, social exclusion, and unequal treatment. The paik system, when combined with elite exploitation and religious discrimination, could become a source of anger. The rebellion showed that ordinary labouring people were not merely silent subjects of royal power. Under certain conditions, they could organize, challenge authority, and reshape political history.

The Moamoria rebellion is important because it reveals the political potential of the “invisible hands” of society. The same groups who cultivated land, served the state, maintained households, supplied goods, and supported religious institutions could also become agents of resistance. Their labour sustained the kingdom, but their grievances could weaken it. When a political system depended heavily on compulsory labour, any deep crisis in labour relations could become a crisis of the state itself.

This does not mean that all labouring groups shared the same interests or acted together in a simple class struggle. Medieval Assamese society was divided by ethnicity, locality, religion, status, occupation, and proximity to power. Some workers were tied to the state; others to nobles or religious institutions. Some may have supported rebellion, while others remained loyal or neutral. Resistance was therefore complex. But the larger point remains: labouring people had agency. They could respond to exploitation, negotiate obligations, and participate in political transformation.

The crisis of the paik system also shows the limits of a state built on compulsory service. Such a system could be effective when social conditions were stable and when service obligations were accepted as legitimate. But when demands increased and legitimacy declined, the same system could produce resentment. The more the state depended on labour, the more vulnerable it became to labour unrest, evasion, and rebellion. The kingdom’s strength and weakness came from the same source.

Labour, resistance, and crisis were therefore deeply connected. Public works, military campaigns, and royal authority depended on the mobilization of paiks. But the burden of that mobilization fell on households and communities. When the demands of the state, nobles, and religious institutions became too heavy, everyday life became strained. Agriculture suffered, family responsibilities increased, and social anger accumulated. Under such conditions, resistance became possible.

The phrase “invisible hands” is especially meaningful here. These hands were invisible in the sense that official history rarely named them or celebrated them. Yet they were never powerless.



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They built the kingdom, fed it, defended it, and maintained it. When pushed beyond endurance, they could also unsettle it. The labouring population was not merely the foundation of medieval Assam's stability; it was also a force that could expose and intensify its crises.

Thus, the study of labour helps us understand both the strength and the decline of the Ahom state. The paik system created a powerful structure of mobilization, but it also tied political authority to the everyday lives of ordinary people in a demanding and unequal way. As long as the system functioned with some balance, it supported the kingdom. When that balance broke down, labour became a site of conflict. The history of resistance in medieval Assam therefore cannot be separated from the history of work, obligation, and social hierarchy.

The labouring groups of medieval Assam were not passive background figures. They were central to state formation, economic production, religious life, and political crisis. The paik system turned labour into state power, but it also created pressures that could lead to resistance. The Moamoria rebellion and related tensions show that ordinary people could become political actors when systems of service, hierarchy, and extraction became unbearable or illegitimate. The same invisible hands that sustained the kingdom could, in moments of crisis, challenge and destabilize it.

Critical Review

The existing scholarship on medieval Assam has made a valuable contribution to the understanding of the region's political, administrative, religious, and social history. Historians have examined the rise of different regional powers, the formation of the Ahom state, the importance of land grants, the structure of administration, the growth of Neo-Vaishnavism, and the social tensions that later contributed to movements such as the Moamoria rebellion. These studies provide the essential foundation upon which any discussion of labour and everyday life must be built. Without the work already done on inscriptions, buranjis, land systems, religious institutions, and state formation, it would be difficult to reconstruct the broader historical setting of medieval Assam.

One of the major strengths of existing scholarship is its careful attention to political structures. The Ahom state, in particular, has been studied as a highly organized political formation with a distinctive administrative system. The offices, ranks, territorial divisions, and mechanisms of governance have helped historians explain how the Ahoms were able to rule for several centuries. The paik system has received special attention because it connected administration, military recruitment, landholding, and labour service. Through this system, scholars have shown that the Ahom state did not depend only on taxation or royal command; it depended deeply on the organized labour of its subjects.

Studies on land systems have also been important. Copper-plate grants and other inscriptional records reveal how land was donated, transferred, controlled, and made meaningful through religious and political authority. These records show the relationship between rulers, Brahmins, temples, and



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local settlements. They help us understand how land became a source of power, prestige, religious merit, and economic control. Such evidence is valuable for studying labour because land had value only when it was made productive by cultivators and other working groups.

Scholarship on Neo-Vaishnavism has also opened important questions about medieval Assamese society. The growth of sattras, devotional communities, religious performance, manuscript culture, and collective worship shaped social life in significant ways. These studies show that religion was not separate from society; it influenced community formation, cultural production, moral discipline, and social identity. The later history of the Moamoria community and the Moamoria rebellion further reveals that religious institutions could become connected with social protest and political crisis. Such works help us see how religious life interacted with hierarchy, labour, and popular discontent.

However, the limitations of existing sources and scholarship are equally important. A major problem is that many of the available sources are elite in origin. Copper-plate grants usually record the names of kings, donors, Brahmins, and religious beneficiaries, but they rarely record the names of ordinary cultivators who made the granted land productive. Buranjis, though extremely valuable, often preserve courtly, administrative, and political perspectives. They focus on rulers, nobles, wars, diplomacy, succession, and official events. Religious literature highlights devotion, morality, saints, institutions, and sacred practice, but it does not always describe the labour relations that sustained religious life.

As a result, many labouring groups remain difficult to recover. Women, artisans, boatmen, fisherfolk, servants, potters, weavers, gold-washers, forest communities, and other marginal groups usually appear only indirectly. Their work is implied rather than fully described. For example, a chronicle may mention a military campaign but not the workers who built boats, carried supplies, forged weapons, or prepared food. A religious text may praise a temple or sattrā but not the cooks, cleaners, cultivators, manuscript copyists, musicians, and craft workers who sustained it. A land grant may describe donation, but not the labouring population that gave the land its actual value.

Another limitation is that the paik system is sometimes presented too neatly, as if it worked in the same way throughout the entire Ahom period. In reality, the experience of paik service must have varied across time, region, social status, and political condition. During periods of war or crisis, the burden on paiks may have increased. In frontier areas, obligations may have differed from more settled regions. Some paiks performed hard manual or military labour, while others held more specialized or privileged positions. Official corruption, noble pressure, land scarcity, and the growth of religious institutions could also affect how the system functioned in practice. Therefore, the paik system should not be treated as a fixed and perfectly balanced arrangement.



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It is also necessary to avoid treating labouring people as one single homogeneous group. Labour in medieval Assam was diverse. A paik, a potter, a woman weaver, a boatman, a temple servant, a sattrā dependent, a gold-washer, a forest worker, and a cultivator attached to a Brahmin landholder did not experience work in exactly the same way. Their obligations, status, freedom, skills, and relationship with power differed. Some labourers were directly controlled by the state. Some were attached to religious institutions. Some worked within household production. Some belonged to socially subordinated occupational groups. A proper labour history must recognize these differences.

The question of women's labour reveals another major gap. Formal historical sources rarely treat women as economic agents unless they belong to royal or elite families. Yet women's work in agriculture, weaving, food preparation, child care, livestock care, ritual activity, and household management was central to the functioning of society. If historians depend only on sources that name formal office-holders and public actors, women's labour will remain invisible. A people-centred history must therefore expand the meaning of labour to include domestic and reproductive work.

The study of everyday life also presents methodological challenges. Everyday life is not always directly recorded in inscriptions, chronicles, or religious texts. Historians must often reconstruct it through indirect evidence. This requires careful interpretation. On one hand, scholars must avoid romantic imagination or unsupported claims. On the other hand, they must not mistake silence for absence. The fact that ordinary workers are unnamed does not mean they were unimportant. It means that the records were shaped by elite priorities.

Thus, the challenge is to make reasonable historical inferences without inventing details. If land was granted, cultivators must have worked it. If temples and sattras functioned, workers must have maintained them. If armies moved, labourers must have supplied transport, food, weapons, and boats. If households survived during periods of male service, women and other family members must have carried additional responsibilities. These conclusions are not fantasies; they are grounded in the material requirements of social life. However, they must be presented carefully and critically.

Overall, the scholarship on medieval Assam provides a strong foundation, but it needs to be extended toward a fuller social history of labour and everyday life. Political history, religious history, and administrative history should not be rejected; rather, they should be read alongside the experiences of ordinary people. The history of medieval Assam becomes richer when kings, nobles, saints, and officials are studied together with cultivators, artisans, women, servants, boatmen, fisherfolk, and marginal communities. Such an approach helps restore the "invisible hands" that sustained the region's economy, society, religion, and state power.

Conclusion

Labour formed the hidden architecture of medieval Assam. The visible institutions and achievements of the period, such as kingdoms, temples, sattras, military campaigns, settlements,



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markets, roads, embankments, boats, and agricultural expansion, were all made possible by the continuous work of ordinary people. Political power, religious authority, economic production, and cultural life did not stand apart from labour; they were built upon it. The lives of cultivators, artisans, boatmen, fisherfolk, women, servants, religious workers, and marginal communities formed the material foundation upon which medieval Assamese society rested.

The study of labour helps us understand medieval Assam from below. Conventional histories often focus on kings, dynasties, wars, saints, land grants, and administrative systems. These themes are important, but they do not fully explain how society functioned in everyday life. A kingdom could not survive merely through royal command. It required fields to be cultivated, grain to be stored, roads to be repaired, boats to be built, weapons to be forged, cloth to be woven, temples to be maintained, and households to be sustained. Behind every visible achievement stood many forms of invisible labour.

The Ahom paik system provides one of the clearest examples of the connection between labour and power. Through this system, landholding, service, military duty, and public work were formally linked. The paik was both cultivator and servant of the state. His labour supported agriculture, defence, transport, construction, and administration. The system gave the Ahom state strength and flexibility, especially in war and public works. At the same time, it placed heavy demands on ordinary households. The paik system therefore reveals both the power of organized labour and the pressures created when the state claimed control over people's time, bodies, and skills.

However, labour in medieval Assam was much wider than the paik system alone. Women's labour was central to household survival, agriculture, weaving, food preparation, child care, livestock care, ritual activity, and social continuity. Artisans and specialists produced the tools, weapons, boats, vessels, textiles, and ritual objects needed by society. Riverine workers, including boatmen and fisherfolk, sustained transport, communication, food supply, and trade in the Brahmaputra valley. Religious workers maintained temples and sattras through cooking, cleaning, cultivation, manuscript copying, music, performance, and service. Servile and marginal groups performed necessary tasks for noble households, officials, religious institutions, and the wider economy.

The title "Invisible Hands" therefore carries a double meaning. These workers were invisible in the sense that they were rarely named or celebrated in formal historical records. Copper-plate grants often preserved the names of donors and beneficiaries, but not the cultivators who made the land productive. Buranjis recorded rulers, nobles, wars, and administrative events, but not always the workers who supplied armies, built boats, or maintained roads. Religious texts praised devotion, saints, temples, and sattras, but often left unnamed the cooks, cleaners, artisans, performers, scribes, and servants who sustained religious life. Yet these workers were also present everywhere. Their labour appears in every field, road, embankment, boat, temple, manuscript, weapon, textile, household, and market.



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To study labour is therefore not to add a small footnote to political history. It is to rethink the foundations of medieval Assamese society. The power of kings depended on cultivators and paiks. The wealth of temples and sattras depended on land, produce, service, and craft. Military success depended on soldiers, weapon-makers, boat-builders, transport workers, and food suppliers. Household life depended on women's unpaid and often unrecognized labour. The economy depended on artisans, fisherfolk, forest workers, potters, weavers, boatmen, and other occupational groups. The history of medieval Assam becomes more complete only when these labouring people are brought into the centre of analysis.

The study also shows that labour was not merely economic. It was social, political, religious, and cultural. Labour shaped relations between rulers and subjects, men and women, elites and dependents, religious institutions and local communities, settled cultivators and forest groups. It organized time, space, obligation, status, and survival. It could produce cooperation, but it could also produce inequality and resentment. The same labouring groups that sustained the state could become part of resistance when service, hierarchy, and extraction became oppressive. The later crises of the Ahom state, including the background of the Moamoria rebellion, show that ordinary people were not passive subjects. They could become historical actors when the burdens placed upon them became unbearable.

A labour-centred history also reminds us to read sources critically. The absence of ordinary workers from formal records does not mean that they were absent from history. It means that historical memory was shaped by power. Those who ruled, donated, wrote, and preserved records became visible, while those who worked often remained unnamed. The task of social history is to recover these hidden lives through careful interpretation, scattered references, occupational traces, and the material logic of everyday life.

In conclusion, medieval Assam was made not only by kings, generals, saints, scribes, nobles, and priests, but also by cultivators, craft workers, women, servants, boatmen, fishers, forest communities, religious workers, and countless unnamed labourers. Their work fed society, moved goods, built institutions, maintained households, sustained worship, supported warfare, and shaped political power. They may have remained invisible in many written narratives, but they were central to the historical life of the region. To recognize their labour is to make the history of medieval Assam more genuine, more grounded, and more complete.

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