



Posa System: A Case Study Of Akas Of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The *posa* system was introduced by Ahoms during the reign of King Pratap Singha to reconcile the hill tribes living on the frontier of their kingdom, which was later on continued by the British Government after its annexation of Assam in 1826, with substantial changes. The *posa* was paid in terms of articles that were not available in the hills. For this purpose, the Ahom kings used to assign some *paiks* or sections of the Assamese cultivators, to take responsibility for *posa* payment. The British government stopped the direct collection of the dues by the tribes themselves from the ryots for it sometimes led to disagreement; instead, began to pay them some cash. This arrangement cut off direct contact between the ryots and the tribes. The British used the *posa* as means and tools to pressurize the Aka offenders to surrender to the authority whenever the latter created outrages in their territory

Keywords *Posa*, Blocked, *Duars*, Raids, ryots, *Paiks*, Aka, Outrages, Expedition

Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh, erstwhile known as North East Frontier Agency, situated in the extreme northeastern part of India. It is bounded by Assam in the south, China in the north, Bhutan in the west and Myanmar in the east. It lies roughly between 26° 28' to 29° 30' N latitudes and 91°30' to 97°30' E longitudes. It is the largest state of Northeast India, with a total area of 83,743 sq km. During the British rule, the state was known as the North East Frontier Tract but in 1954, it was renamed as the North-East Frontier Agency and the frontier division were given the names on the basis of rivers of the state like Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tripa divisions. With the North Eastern Area (Re-organisation) Act, 1972, the state was made as the Union Territory and it was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh. On 20th February 1987, Arunachal Pradesh attained its full-fledged statehood and became the 24th state of Indian Union.

Arunachal Pradesh is the house of a large number of colourful tribes. Each has their own history and socio-cultural patterns of life. The state is largely divided into three important zones viz., the Western Zone, the Central Zone and Eastern Zone based on their cultures and religions. The Western Zone is largely dominated by Mahayana sect of Buddhism while the major population of the Central Zone is believer of *Donyi-Poloism*, an indigenous faith mostly practiced by the Tani clans of the state. The Eastern zone is dominated by the Hinayana sect of Buddhism and also sizeable number of indigenous worshippers.

The Aka, also known as Hrusso is one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, settled mostly in West Kameng district. The language of the tribe is quite different from their neighbouring tribes. According to the Linguistic Survey of India Report, the Aka language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages.

Due to a lack of concrete evidence of script or archaeological records, it is difficult to give a concrete idea about the migration of the ethnic tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. As Robinson quoted in his work *Descriptive Account of Assam*

It seems almost vain to lift up dark veil which conceal the origin of the tribes, to trace back their history or to gain any information of the various revolution by which they have been influence; their subjects belong to times and circumstances which are beyond the limit of certain knowledge.

The migration of Aka's is said to be taken place at different time periods through distinct routes. It seems that some of them have migrated from south Assam and the rest migrated from North Tibet. The total population of the tribe prior to post-independence period was very less say about 1000 approximately but according to 2011 Census the population of the Aka was 8110.

Posa System: Origin

The term 'Posa' literally means a collection of subscriptions for a common purpose. With regard to the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the *posa* was defined in the official glossary of terms as the allowances paid to certain hill tribes inhabiting the hills on the northern frontier of Assam bordering Darrang and Lakhimpur, on account of commuted black mail or in consideration of the abandonment by them of their claims with regards to certain *duars*. In general, the term *posa* came to applied to all payments made to the hill tribes by the government, whether these were in commutation of blackmail or compensation for customary demands of the tribal chiefs of the bordering hills of Arunachal Pradesh.

This system regularized the demands of the hill people upon the inhabitants of the *duar* areas and also recognized their claim to a share in the produce of the fertile lands of these areas. It also checked to a great extent the inroads of the hill people into the plain area and thereby helped in maintaining peace and tranquillity in the kingdom. In return for this, they were to acknowledge the overlordship of the Ahom king and pay him an annual tribute consisting of the articles produced in their respective hill areas.

The *posa* has often been wrongly interpreted as blackmail in the official jargons of the British period. The British administrators neither had the intention to understand the true nature of *posa* nor could they make their doubt clear as to what it was. They cared little to ascertain "Whether these claims had their basis in primeval rights or whether they were merely the definite expression of a barbarian cupidity". Till third quarter of the nineteenth century they often expressed their grudge that, "... we are met to this day by difficulties arising from the indefinite nature of the connection subsisting between the Assam sovereigns and their savage neighbors." On the other evidences, it was understood as "a well-ascertained revenue payment on account of which a corresponding remission was made in the State demand upon the ryot and was compared even with 'the Chouth of the Marathas and blackmail of the ancient Highlanders.' Actually, the blackmail had originated in Bengal in a different context.

The system of payment of blackmail was, in fact, a British policy stated to buy off the raids of the aborigines of the Rajmahal hills in the Bengal Presidency. It is even more interesting to know that the 'blackmail' was a one-way transaction, but there had always been two-way transactions under the *posa* system. Though there is no authoritative record of the *posa* in the Ahom Buranjis, the true picture of the *posa* can be reconstructed with the careful analysis of the various socio-political realities of Assam in the 16th and 17th centuries. Shihabuddin Talish who accompanied Mir Jumla in his expedition of Assam in 1662-1663 wrote "Although most of the inhabitants of the neighbouring hills pay no taxes to the Raja of Assam yet they accepted his sovereignty and obeyed some of his commands."

Thus, the *posa* was neither an "uncertain, ill-defined exaction, depending in amount upon the rapacity of the different hordes who might descend to levy it" nor was it a blackmail levying of which differed little from the "Maratha chouth". It was rather a well-ascertained revenue payment and fixed feudal levy emanating out of the feudal privileges of some of the bordering hill chiefs of Arunachal Pradesh and was properly recognized by the Ahom rulers of Assam.

When the British occupied Assam after the First Anglo-Burmese War, the *posa* system was continued as it was under the Ahoms. It was the first priority of the local British officers to maintain intact the arrangements of their native predecessors and to avoid the appearance of anything like radical or unexpected change. That is why David Scott was extremely cautious in dealing with the rights of the hill tribes and allowed them to continue to realize their respective shares of *posa* directly from the ryots. He did so because several tribal chiefs advanced their claims to rights more or less definite over lands lying in the plains while others claimed tributary payments from villages below their hills or the services of *paiks* assigned to them by the Ahom rulers.

However, direct collection of *posa* from the ryots was viewed by the early British officers as inconvenient and they suggested either to abolish the system or make suitable changes. To effect a reasonable settlement of the issue Robertson directed Captain White in early 1834 to carry on negotiations with the chiefs of the hills under which either a certain sum of money should be annually paid to them in lieu of all demands or a certain quantity of various articles be collected for them at fixed localities. Under no circumstance they were to be allowed to proceed beyond a defined line to collect their contributions personally. In this connection the Government of India held the view that stopping of *posa* might lead to troubles and since it did not affect its interests immediately, the conciliatory policy regarding the *posa* collection should continue.

The Governor General-in-Council in their letter of 20th February 1834 concurred in the views of Captain White as to the desirability of a fair commutation of the claims, but they were not inclined, on principle, to adopt a measure quite different from the conciliatory policy followed by David Scott toward the tribes having the rights of the collection of *posa*. Under such guidelines engagement were made with the Akas, the Nishis, the Bhutias, the Sherdukpens, the Tthembang Monpas and the Dzongeus of Talungdzong in which friendly relations were emphasized. It was thought by the local officers that a humane policy displayed towards the tribes would effectually secure the peace of the outlying areas and lead to beneficial results. The commutation of *posa* in yearly cash allowance and discontinuity of the practice of collection from individual ryots was thought as an improvement over the earlier system. Its real advantage was felt in the relative ease with which the *posa* could be withheld as a punitive measure.

Posa System under the British Rule

Like other hill tribes of the northern frontier of Assam, the Akas were also granted the right of *posa* or the right to share in the produce of the Charduar areas. A number of Assamese families were assigned to them from whom they could levy the stipulated quantity of articles as *posa* and who were made liable to pay them instead of the state their fixed annual contributions. Thus, the members of these families who were assigned to the Akas were called Aka-Bahatias. The *bahatias* were settled in the villages in the Aka *duars* in order to restrict the annual visits of the hillmen to a fixed locality.

In return for the privileges of the *posa*, the Akas had to recognise the overlordship of the Ahom king and pay annual tributes to him with their hill products. If they created any outrages then the passes were blocked and allowed no one to down or go up. Each tribe in the western frontier had different *duars* to contact with the plains, different prescribed areas to procure articles of their necessity. The Ahom Buranjis are, however, silent about any Ahom-Aka conflict throughout the entire period of Ahom rule in Assam.

Following the Treaty of Yandaboo of 1826, the history of the Brahmaputra valley became an integral part of the Imperial Indian History. After the annexation of Assam, the whole of Assam was divided into two administrative divisions 'the Lower Assam and the Upper Assam' by the British authority.¹⁴ The Lower Assam was comprised of the Kamrup, the Nowgong and the greater portion of Darrang district while the Upper Assam consist of the Sibsagar, the Lakhimpur, a small portion of the Darrang and the Sadiya Frontier Tract with the headquarter Gauhaty and Rangpur respectively. David Scott was made the agent to the Governor General of India and was authorised to negotiate friendly relation with the frontier tribes of North East India.

The British soon found that the valley was surrounded on the north, east and south by numerous hill tribes and some of these hill tribes claims land lying on their foothills and some claims tributary payments from the villages below their hills or the services of the *paiks* in those villages. In the beginning the British followed the Ahom policy to deal with the hills tribes but soon realised the inconvenience of allowing the hill tribes to come down to plains to collect their dues as sometimes it led to quarrels. Thus, the system of collection of dues in kind was replaced with the payment in cash through the appointed officials. This arrangement cut off the direct contact between the ryots and the tribes.

The earlier accounts of the British period constantly mentioned the name Aka. Their records mentioned Aka as a tribe sub-divided into two clans: the Hazarikhawas or eaters at thousand's hearths and Kapachors or cotton thieves. Each clan organised under a Raja or chief. It was to the Hazarikhawas that the British Government granted the *posa* and were expected to give a part of their collection to the Kapachors. The report of 1825 stated the Hazarikhawas were allowed to receive from each house of their allotted *khels* one portion of a female dress, one bundle of cotton thread and one cotton gamocha (handkerchief). David Scott, the political agent succeeded in making an agreement with the Akas by which they agree to forego their rights to direct collection in return of a payment of Rs. 175 per annum by the British Government. The Aka also promised that they would not give shelter to the offenders of British in their territories and also promised to help them to detain the offender and criminals. The British Government also directed that any conflicts and complexities related to *posa* payment would be referred to the British Magistrate for settlement.

Show of Force Against Violations

The consequences of non-compliance with the terms of engagements that different tribes had entered into with the British Government amounted in some cases withhold the payment of *posa* and a blocked of the markets of the plains to the offending tribes or a prohibitive order was issued to the effect that they would not be allowed to come down to the plains to purchase their necessaries. In case of serious offence like murder or kidnapping of British subjects, a demand of surrender of the culprit was made. If the demand was not completed, an expedition was despatched to punish the offending tribes. The expedition first tried to resolve the issues through peaceful means and negotiations with the help of *kotokies*. Sometimes collective fines

were imposed on the villages of the offenders in case the culprits could not be arrested.

In 1835, the payment of *posa* to the Hazarikhawas was stopped after the Balipara Massacre of 1835, because they were also suspected to be involved in the affair. The Balipara Massacre took place under the leadership of Kapachor chief Taghi Raja. In 1829, Taghi Raja fled to Assam as a result of inter-tribal dispute, where he was captured and sent to Guwahati jail. While at jail he became a disciple of a Hindu spiritual master and through his influence got release from the jail in 1832. He went back to the hills and gattered his followers to avenge those who were behind his captured in Assam. Thereafter he came down to Balipara in 1835 and set fire to the frontier outpost there. Seventeen persons were killed including men, women and children. The government made every effort to capture him but proved failed. At last, through the *kotokies* an offer of pardon and pension was made and finally he surrendered to the British authority and promised to maintain peace in their frontier in the future. Therefore in 1842, the *posa* of the Hazarikhawas was restored after the settlement and also a new arrangement was made with the Kapachor chiefs. This time the Kapachors were also granted the *posa*.

Again in 1857, the Aka chief protest for getting their *posa* raised and refused to accept the *posa* granted to them. The government responded the protest by withholding of *posa* and closing the markets of the *duars*. Different measures had been made to keep a sharp watch over the borders of the hills to avoid any uncertainties. The chiefs could not stand this and sued for peace in 1859. After this the Aka lived peacefully for nearly a quarter of a century.

With the exception of some troubles in 1878 everything went on peacefully till 1883-1884 when the first expedition since British occupation of Assam entered into their hills. That was year of the Calcutta Exhibition where specimens of agricultural implements and products wearing apparel, ornaments and weapons were wanted for the purpose. To procure these articles Lakhidhar Mauzadar of Balipara was sent up to the hills in 1883 by the government and if possible, obtain one Aka man and a woman for the purpose of modelling. As soon as they heard about the purpose of the Mauzadar's visit, they got infuriated and detained the Mauzadar and his servant but allowed the remaining of his followers to go unmolested. At the same time on 10th November 1883, a party of about 100 Akas headed by Chandi, brother of Medhi Raja, carried off as captives the clerk of the Balipara forest office, the forest ranger and two guns.

The officials tried all peaceful measures to get back those people who had been detained but failed to rescue them. All these incidents left no other alternatives for the government but to take a firm decision to bring the Aka back to their senses of by force. On 27th November on the recommendation of Mr. Elliot the than Chief Commissioner of Assam, an expedition to the Aka hills was approved by the Government of British India. The objective of the expedition was to recover the captives from the hands of the Akas and to obtain fullest proof about Lakhidhar's death and to punish the person guilty of the violent detention of Lakhidhar.

The force under the command of General Hill entered the Aka hills in the cold weather of 1883 and occupied Medhi's village. To show the displeasure of the government towards the ring leaders of the Baliapra raid, their houses were burnt down. A fine of 10 mithuns valued between Rs. 700 and 1000 were imposed on Aka. The villages and the granaries of Kapachor Aka had been destroyed.

After the return of the party, Mr. Elliot proposed some steps for further reduction of the Aka. He proposed a complete blockade of the country unless Medhi and other chiefs come down and make submission to the government and also decided to withhold their *posa* till 1886. He further stated that Kapachor Aka will be not admitted into British territory and if found anywhere they will be arrested. They were also required to bring the prismatic compass stolen from the Forest office and to restore the money taken from Lakhidhar, forester and the opium shop at Balipara. On doing this, their submission will be accepted and order forbidding any Aka to enter or trade in British territory will be withdrawn. At last, the Aka chief Medhi Raja and Chandi appeared before Colonel Campbell, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang and made their submission. An agreement of good behaviour was executed with Medhi wherein he accepted the foothills as the boundary between their hills and the British territory.

The blocked against the tribe has been raised; however, it was stated that their *posa* would be restored after two years based on how they conduct themselves. In 1889-1890, the Kapachor Aka chief came to Tezpur and received their *posa* which had been withheld since 1883. After this, the British relations with the Akas began to improve.

Conclusions

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the *posa* system had been the key policy of both the Ahom and the British governments to appease the Aka and other hill tribes. Though the Ahom army was better equipped with comparatively advanced weapons against the punitive weapons of the hill tribes they usually avoided expeditions into the hill countries because they had realized that it will not only expensive but also unpredictably hazardous due to their inaccessibility. Thus, the payment of compensation in the form of *posa* was a pre-British system and it was introduced by the Ahoms to reconcile the hill tribes living on the frontier of their kingdoms. It may have its origin in encroachment, or it may have been based upon customary and primeval rights asserted by the hillmen of the present Arunachal. The British Government could fully utilize the *posa* system on the Aka as per requirements of time and situation to control their raids and outrages. The system was quite successful for both the Ahom and the British authority to protect their territory from the outrages of hill tribes and maintain peace on the frontier. The system was continued till the end of British rule in India.

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