

An attempt in understanding some aspects of Ahom *Buranjis*

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ABSTRACT

The writing of the *Buranjis* or Ahom chronicles was originated in the medieval period of Assam. It is a collection of Historical records which appears to be the richest amongst the vernacular literatures of India. *Buranjis* were compiled under the orders of the Kings and the supervision of the higher Government officials and hence these are always considered as most valuable and authentic assets of Assamese literatures.

KEYWORDS: *Buranjis*, Vernacular, Assamese.

1. INTRODUCTION

The coming of the Ahoms in the 13th century made an incredible contribution in history writing in Assam. They began a procedure of keeping records of all events of the time in the form of '*Buranjis*. *Buranjis* is not a merely a 'word' or a 'term' for Tai peoples in general and for the Tai-Ahoms in particular, in Northeast India. It happens to be the most precious gift, a sacred wealth and a legacy left by their forefathers. It is the living heritage, the life force that they may live for or live by it. It is worth mentioning that Tai-Ahoms who had left indelible marks in the medieval history of Brahmaputra Valley and who, under historical circumstances had lost everything they had, held these *Buranjis* in all reverence as their proud possessions. They now consider it as their unbounded and imperative, holy and sacred duty to preserve, maintain and study the *Buranjis* texts in language and script once they were written by their forefathers.¹

The word '*Buranjis*' appears to be of Tai-Chinese origin. From time immemorial, the Tais were well known for their educational and intellectual activities. From several centuries, they used to read and write using papers produced from the pulps of bamboo leaves and barks of mulberry tree. They authored many books on history, philosophy, religion, agriculture and medicine. The academic activities of the Tais generated a jealousy in the minds of the Chinese people. It is said that Emperor Shi-Wang-Ti or Shi-Huang-Di (249-210 B.C) burnt all such books except the books on agriculture and medicine. Moreover at the same time, some four hundred sixty Tai scholars were also buried alive.² It confirms the view that the Tai Language might have been a parallel language with that of the Chinese of the time. Besides, the emergence of the *lung-shan* culture also lent support to this view since it happened to be the earliest cultural manifestation of the Chinese civilisation. The *lung-shanoid* culture was the result of the fusion of Yao and Tai culture as subscribed by many scholars.³

However, to some other scholars, etymologically, the word *Bu-ran-ji* is related to the Pali-Chinese or Pali hybrid origin, its meaning being "annals recorded on papers."⁴ (Buran or Puran = annals; ji or zhe= paper). Considering the fact that China is credited with the discovery of paper, it might be that the Tais of Southwest China, at least from the middle of the sixth century A.D had been putting down their records on papers. Still now the Tai communities of Northeast India possess a vast treasure of literature written on handmade papers. The Tai-Ahoms, later on, The Tai-Ahom oligarchy and the priestly clans used Sanchi bark (*acquilaria agallocha*) growing abundantly in Assam, in lieu of the handmade papers. Thus the word *Bu-ran-ji* is reminiscent of a far wider cultural dimension of the various groups of Tai people covering Southern China, Thailand, Laos, Burma, Vietnam and Northeast India.⁵

However, in general, "*Buranjis*" is a word purely of Tai-Ahom language.⁶ The Tai-Ahom language is tonal and monosyllabic. The same word carried different meanings at different times depending upon its tonal use. Hence, a word by word or syllable by syllable translation is likely to be pedantic and crude. Thus, the English translation of the word '*Buranjis*' as a 'store house of knowledge for the fools'⁷ or "A store that teaches the ignorant" lacks the imagination in bringing out the true meaning and the sense of the term.

Therefore, in order to get the proper meaning, the historian has to make some kind of contact with those who coined the word for what purpose and what for actually. The Tai-Ahoms when they landed themselves first in

Upper Assam in the thirteenth Century, used to record all the events, both significant and non-significant, of their adventurous migratory life with the specific purpose for the knowledge of their succeeding generations. It was firmly believed that without the knowledge of such events about their forefathers, their descendents would remain as *bu* (unknowledgeable or lack of knowledge of the past) for which it was essential to preserve the records in safe custody in a house for their use afterwards. It was specifically meant for their offspring's who would draw inspiration and courage to face challenges of the time and to build up the future as well. The concept, content and meaning of the term *Buranjiss*, thus, nears the definition of history as Carr would define, i.e. The past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present; and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past.

The importance of *Buranjis* as a crucial element of pre-colonial history has been widely accepted. The established fact is that the *Buranjis* tradition bore a marked similarity with the Southeast Asian tradition of historical chronicles. *Buranjis* were compiled primarily at the behest of the royal house. Monarchical instruction played a crucial role in shaping the content of a *Buranjis*. The Ahom state had to depend on these chronicles for their diplomacy. They encouraged scholars to write about the past as a distinct and formal scholarship. Information and facts mentioned in a *Buranjis* emerged after consulting State papers. Quite often, the actual participants in events were fortunate enough to write these *Buranjis*. Rarely was any mention made of the author, who was indicated only at a later period.⁸

The value of these *Buranjis* may be also be seen from the Marriage system of the Ahoms which is well known as *Chalang*. The solemn occasion was dignified by the narration of the past momentous events of their ancestors to the bridegroom and the bride. After hearing the *Buranjis* from the priests, the bridegroom took an oath by holding the *hengdang* (sword) placed at his hands by the bride, that he would follow the ideals of his ancestors and so shall protect the weak, punish the wrong doers, serve the people selflessly and shall defend the land with all his might. Thus, the lessons of history were imparted at a time when adult manhood life called for larger responsibilities for the cause of the society and the State. As such it happened to be an important event in the life of an Ahom youth at that time where *Buranjiss* was ossified.⁹

2. CLASSIFICATIONS OF BURANJIS

There are some synonymous term like *Bu-lan-chi*, *Bu-lan-ji* and *Pu-lan-ji* which are almost equivalent in meaning with that of the *Buranjis*¹. The meaning of *Bu-lan-chi* and *Bu-lan-ji* is almost the same (*Bu*=lack of knowledge; *lan*= old times; *chi* or *ji*= paper or documents) So also is *Pu-lan-chi*, *pu* meant grandfather, that is, papers, documents or records of the time of the grandfathers. The term *Pu-lan-chi* also includes stories, lores, and myths true and untrue.¹⁰ Thus the tradition of transmitting the knowledge of the past had been continuing from generation to generation. *Buranjis*, *Bulanchi*, *Bulanji* and *Pulanchi* are of same tonal sounds and they convey the same meaning similar to that of *Buranjis*, with a slight difference in denotations.

DEO and *DIN* are the other two categories in the class of *Buranjis*. The *Deo Buranjis* suggests the mythical or divine origin of the Ahom monarchs while the *DIN Buranjis* is basically a political history of the Tai-Ahom rule in the Brahmaputra valley. The *Deo-Buranjis* speaks of another dimension. Perhaps, this kind of *Buranjis* was devised to assert the legitimacy of the dynastic rule of the Tai-Ahoms before their general subjects, both Tai and non-Tai. Therefore, its historicity is much limited in the sense that these are but subjective narration as far as the legends and myths are concerned. However, stripped of its myths, the truth appears to be sound and clear.

Lai-lik, *Lit* and *Tu-ku-lai* are some other Tai-Ahom language records and documents which fall within the categories of *Buranjis*. *Lai-lik* means 'big book' containing exhaustive accounts. Like the *DIN Buranjis*, the *Lai-lik Buranjis* records all kinds of events and happenings such as wars, treatise, letters, statement of important personalities and even sub-stories. In Assamese language it is called *Barpahi Buranjis*. The *Lit* (sacred texts) *Buranjis* are all in brief containing one single episode. Two other words namely, *Tu-ku-lai* and *Lai-tu* are also found among the *Buranjis* written in Tai-Ahom language and script. These *Buranjis* deal with specific subjects. The *Buranjis* also mention two more words in its class. They are *Ru-put* and *Oo-kut*. *Ru-put* is a Tai-Ahom word meaning documents of knowledge (*Ru*= knowledge; *put*- document). In this sense, it is equal in meaning with that of the *Lai-Lik Buranjis* which contains exhaustive contents. Chao pha Siu-Tan-Pha (1714-1744) gave order to (one) Manohar Bailung Phukan, who wrote one such *Ru-Put Buranjis* containing the history from 1497 to 1714 A.D. Unfortunately, this *Ru-Put* is said to have been taken to London and no copy of this is available in Assam, India.¹¹

The *Oo-kut-Buranjis* are the records of events straightway taking place at the time of occurrence. In other words, this may be termed as Diary of current events. (*Oo* = current times; *Kut*= seize and Keep; i.e. to record and preserve. Such *Buranjis* are still lying uncared for in many hearths and homes of the Tai peoples in North-eastern India.¹² These texts need to be collected, analysed, documented and systematised for study, evaluation and analysis. For this, the foremost task is to acquire and master the Tai-Ahom language for a correct appraisal and understanding of the medieval history of the Northeast India.

The Buranjis can also be divided into four categories based on the language used in it. In the first categories come those scripts written in pure Tai language. Secondly, those written in Assamese language but in Tai script. Thirdly, those written in Tai language but in Assamese language and lastly, those written in Pure Assamese language.

Tai–Ahom historiography admits of outmost sacrosanctity and hence, wilful misrepresentation of facts was not only a crime but also a sin. The Tai-Ahoms were very much historically conscious people. An Ahom, whether he is a king or prince, a noble or an ordinary official, they must have the knowledge of Buranjis.

3. POLEMICS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Buranjis written in both old and new Assamese language are numerous. Most of these were either translation or re-written afresh based on the translation. It was evident that the translators were not well versed with the Tai-Ahom language. Besides, historical translation was a difficult task without a command over the language from which the historical texts were being translated. Hence, eminent authorities on Tai-Ahom studies have raised serious doubts about the correct and accurate translations of these *Buranjis*.¹³ They have substantially showed the pitfalls. It is now firmly believed that such *Buranjis* do exhibit some imperfect translations, serious interpolations, imaginary interpretation, subjective conjectures and sometimes, sheer distortion of facts. Even colonial historians like Edward Gait, John Peter Wade, Robinson, Pemberton and others who were otherwise known for their objectivity in historical interpretations, appeared to have failed to achieve the comprehensiveness for the same reason as they had to depend in second hand and unreliable information and even on legends and heresy's. The process is said to have began from the time of British occupation of Assam. The trend was to project the image of the Ahom rule as the worst possible one ever in human history, while at the same time, the advent of the British and consequent colonisation of Assam were rather a boon than mere loss of independence. Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Maniram Dhekial Phukan, Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan belonged to this school of thought. After Independence, this sort of historiography had still been profusely used by some historians. This resulted in history being more argumentative, wildly speculative, totally ignoring an 'imaginative understanding' of the Historical facts.¹⁴

4. CONCLUSION

The Tais of Northeast India are very rich in literature. They possess a vast treasure of Tai literature which includes astrology and divination, omens and remedies, cosmology and cosmogony, invocation and prayers and sacrifice manuals, religious scriptures, criminal codes and ethics, marriage manuals, legends and traditions, almanac and calendars, However, the principal among these, being the historical literatures =, known as *Buranji*, number about some hundred and a half. These were exclusively written in Tai and Assamese or mixed language. These *Burajis* in Tai-Ahom language are usually the records of Tai-Ahom rule covering the period up to 1838 C.E and it provides a valuable contribution in re-constructing the history of the medieval period of Assam and Northeast India.

¹ Buragohain, Romesh. *The Lost Trails*. Demaji: Chao Puspa Gogoi, 1994: 3.

² Shouyi, Bai. *A History of Chinese Muslim*. Beijing: Zhonghus Book Company, 2003: 127

³ Gogoi, Jiba. *Jugar Ahban*. Souvenir BOPMT, 1993: 26

⁴ Gogoi, Nomal. *New Light on the History of Assam Based on Ahom Buranjis*. Golaghat: Souvenir, BOPMT, 1992: 9

⁵ Buragohain, Romesh. *The Lost Trails*. Dhemaji: Chao Puspa Gogoi, 1994: 4.

⁶ Acharyya, N.N. *The History of Medieval Assam*. New Delhi: Omsons Publication, 2003:17.

⁷ Gogoi, Lila. *Buranji: Atu Somu Parichay*. Guwahati: Prakash, 1976: 71.

⁸ Saikia, Arupjyoti. "History, buranjis and Nation: Surya Kumar Bhuyan's Histories in 20th century Assam." *The Indian Economis and Social History Review* 45, no. 4 (2008) : 473-507

⁹ Buragohain, Romesh. *The Lost Trails*. Dhemaji: Chao Puspa Gogoi., 1994: 5.

⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁰ Buragohain, Romesh. *The Lost Trails*. Dhemaji: Chao Puspa Gogoi, 1994: 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Gogoi, Lila. *Buranji: Ata Somu Parichay*. Guwahati: Prakash, 1976: 17-23.

¹³ Buragohain, Romesh. *The Lost Trails*. Dhemaji: Chao Puspa Gogoi, 1994: 7.

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