



Buranji: A Unique Historiography of Ahom Age

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Abstract: The writing of buranjis is a traditional record keeping process of the Ahom age, which can be considered as historiography of medieval Assam. The buranjis were compiled by the Chiring Barua under the instruction of Rajmantri and then kept it in Gandhia Bharal. There are different types of buranjis according to its subject matter. Both the Ahom and Assamese language were used in buranjis for compilation. Most of the buranjis were anonymous. The buranjis can be considered as the most reliable source material of Ahom age, because they were compared, scrutinized and verified to establish the true facts only. During the colonial period, KAS and DHAS were established and many buranjis were published under the supervision of S.K. Bhuyan, the Director of DHAS. According to S.K. Bhuyan the number of collected buranjis are 150. The recovered buranjis were revised and edited by the renowned historians of Assam like Hiteswar Barbarua, K. L. Barbaruah, P.C. Choudhury, S. K. Bhuyan, Benudhar Sharma, Lila Gogoi, etc .

Key-words: Buranji, Chiring , Gandhia Bharal, Rajmantri, Tai-Ahom

I. Introduction:

The tradition of keeping records and writing genealogical facts during the Ahom age created a type of historical writings known as Buranji, which are considered as the most important and reliable primary sources of Medieval Assam history. Buranji derives its origin from Tai-Ahom language and it should be pronounced as Bu-Ran-Ji. According to Dr. Lila Gogoi originally the word is Bu-Lan-Chi or Bu-Lan-Ji and gradually it turned to Bu-Ran-Ji¹, which means the storehouse of knowledge that enlightens the ignorant. The Ahoms were the members of the Shan branch of great Tai or Thai family of South-East Asia. The Shans first inhabited a land named Tyai -Shan on the bank of river Tarim which flowed to the north of Mongolia and China.² From Tyai-Shan they first migrated to China in about 5th century AD and then to Mungrimungram in Yunan. They expanded gradually the whole of the Hukong valley and established there a group of states.

The Ahoms claim Mungrimungram as their original homeland and state that Khunlai, their younger progenitor ruled over the kingdom. The third king of Khunlai's family divided the kingdom, Mungrimungram proper and Maulung on the bank of the Sheuli river in Upper Burma between his two sons. It was Maulung, where Sukapha, the founder of Ahom kingdom was born. Sukapha left his homeland in about 1215 AD and he was accompanied by a few nobles, a few hundreds of followers and had a retinue of 2 elephants and 300 horses.³ Sukapha had to face different types of encounters from the local indigenous people during the initial stage of his journey and at last he reached the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 AD. Then he ordered his chroniclers to keep records of all events as these happened and he was accompanied by some chroniclers also known as Chiring Laut, Mohung, Bailung etc. The Tais had a wonderful tradition of writing different types of texts using paper made from bamboo leaves and later on such tradition continued its legacy by Sukapha. According to Edward Gait "The Ahoms had a historic sense very fully developed, and many of the priests and nobles maintained Buranjis, or chronicles, which were written up from time to time, and which contain a careful, reliable and continuous narrative of their rule."⁴ The Buranjis contain different types of information about Ahom age and the contemporary era. They generally deal with the political event of the period, such as warfare, diplomatic correspondences, working of the administration, including the appointment and dismissal of the ministers, officers, etc. Reports of the frontier officers or the ambassadors, architectural plan and estimate of the chief engineer, accounts of the satra etc. were also termed as buranjis with different appellations like Datialia Buranji, Katakai Buranji, Changrung Phukanar Buranji and Satria Buranji. According to Swarnalata Baruah, the "Buranjis are so numerous and voluminous that they overshadow the other primary sources like archaeology and numismatics"⁵.



Objective of the paper:

The main objective of the paper is to make a comprehensive study of Buranji as a historiography of Ahom age and to examine its the rational character that, as these were compiled under the instruction of the Ahom rulers. So, a critical analysis is necessary while discussing it as a source material. As a whole, there will be a discussion on the traditional writing method of buranji, the themes of buranji and the preservation procedure of buranji under royal patronage.

II. Review of Literature:

Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan, the great legendary figure in the studies of the history of Assam, who had done enormous work on buranji by collecting and editing old manuscripts and it's a great contribution for the next generation of Assam. Dr. Bhuyan had done all his historical works through the institutions like Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti (established in 1912) and Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (established in 1928). As a Director of D.H.A.S. Dr. Bhuyan conducted both extensive and Intensive research and publish them in the form of books. Besides him, Rai Bahadur Kanaklal Baruah, Dr. P.C. Choudhury, the great Sanskrit scholar, Professor Krishna Kanta Handique, great Indologist, Dr, Bani Kanta Kakati and Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua were the strong pillars of Assam who gave a strong foundation to the study and research of the history and culture of Assam. Another figure of Assamese literature Dr. Lila Gogoi critically analysed the buranjis as a historical literature in his book *Buranji Sahitya*(Dibrugarh , 1988) and made a comparative study on buranjis with other historical writings of Indian perspective like Bakhars and Tarikhis.⁶ Another historians like Dr. Swarnalata Baruah, Dr. Heramba Kanta Barpujari, Dr. Dambarudhar Nath made analytical references in their comprehensive books of Assam history.

Research Methodology and hypothesis:

The research method of this paper is analytical and historical and the source materials are mostly secondary sources. A comparative study has been done while the published chronicles are studied and verified to make a rational view on the subject matter. Several research questions are coming out like-(1) Are the buranjis biased? (2) How far the buranjis contain the characteristics of scientific historiography? (3) Can we consider it only as annals or chronicles? To find out the hypothesis of the paper, a fact is clearly coming out that the Ahoms had a strong sense of recording and preserving the past events in a systematic way and this tradition was

carried on with them from Maolung. They were always careful to establish the truth only by scrutinizing the documents after compilation. So, the buranjis may be considered as primary source material of Ahom Age and to some extent, it can be considered as a traditional historiography of India.

Classification of Buranjis:

There are two types of buranjis divided on the basis of the size and theme and they are (i) Lai-Lik-Buranji and (ii) Lit Buranji. Those buranjis which are bigger in volume cover all topics relating to political history is called Lai-Lik-Buranji in Tai-Ahom and in Assamese they are known as Barpahi Buranji. Another buranjis dealing with one event only are small in size and known as Lit-Buranji and its Assamese appellation Katha is generally applied. As for example, Ram Singhar Yuddhar Katha in which only the expedition of Ram Singha was described. Another two broad divisions of Buranjis are (i) Deo-Buranji and (ii) Din-Buranji. The lineage of the Ahoms with Lord Indra and their heavenly origin were described in Deo-Buranji with an objective to establish the divine origin of the Ahom rulers.

The subject-matter of buranjis contained every aspects of Ahom administration and their rule and even the Ahom official class also recorded their genealogy in their family buranjis, known as Chakaripheti Buranji.⁷ So, on the basis of the subject-matter the buranjis can be divided into some sections, like-

- (1) Buranjis of pre-Ahom age
- (2) Buranjis of Ahom age
- (3) Dativalia Buranji
- (4) Buranjis of neighbouring States
- (5) Katak Buranji
- (6) Chakiyal Buranji
- (7) Chang-Rung-Phukanar Buranji etc.

The earlier buranjis were written in Tai language and during the reign of Suhungmung Dihingia Raja the Assamese language was also used for writing buranjis. Since then, both the languages were considered as the language of buranji writing. The Ahom rulers were so conscious about the compilation of buranjis that an officer, known as Gandhia Phukan was in charge of the buranjis in royal possession. Among the buranjis a number of them dealing with the neighbouring states. As for example Padshah Buranji deals with the Badshahs of Delhi and Mirjumla's invasion to Assam. Another such buranjis were the Kachari Buranji, the Jayantiya Buranji and the Tripura Buranji, all written in 18th century. These buranjis deal with the Ahom



diplomatic relations with the kingdoms of Kachari, Jayantiya and Tripura. In Deodhai Asam Buranji, a brief account of the Chutiyas, the Mikirs and the Burmese are also included. Another section of buranjis deal with the reports of the Ahom ambassadors sent towards the neighbouring states known as Kataki Buranji. Another such type of buranjis known as Chakiyalar Buranji, the report of the officers at different outposts. And the reports of the frontier officers are considered as Datiyaliya Buranji. Changrung Phukanar Buranji are the records of the Chief Engineer, which included the construction of maidams, temples, roads, bridges, buildings, excavation of tanks etc.

The buranjis can be divided into two broad divisions on the basis of the language (i) Tai-Ahom Buranjis and (ii) Buranjis written in Assamese language. The Ahom Buranji is the most important buranji written in Tai language which contains a complete account of the Ahom reign. It uses the Aijepi era and contains some rare information. Rai Bahadur Golap Chandra edited and translated it to English. Another notable Tai-Ahom buranji is the Weissalisa, actually a compilation of two chronicles called Weissali-Hukong and Weissali-Mung-dun-sun-kham. These two chronicles describe the Burmese invasion in 1817.

Most of the buranjis recovered in the later period are written in Assamese language and a number of such buranjis have been published by Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, (DHAS) Assam, Gauhati. Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti also published some buranjis like Purani Asam Buranji. Another important chronicle Satsari Asam Buranji is a compilation of seven different chronicles edited and published by S.K. Bhuyan. The Kamrupar Buranji was also compiled during the last phase of 17th century and it contains the Assamese text of eighteen diplomatic letters exchanged between the Ahom court and the Mughal Generals after the conclusion of the treaty in 1639. An Asam Buranji obtained from the family of Sukumar Mahanta which gives note on the Ahom progenitors and their ancestral kingdom and also describes the history of Assam from the commencement of Ahom rule till the accession Gadadhar Singha in 1681.

Some buranjis are compiled during the close of the Ahom rule like Tungkhungia Buranji written by Srinath Duara Barbarua which deals with the rule of the Tungkhungia clan of the Ahom kings from Gadadhar Singha to Kamaleswar Singha (1681-1810). During the early part of 19th century, Kashinath Tamuli Phukan and Harakanta Sarma Barua Sadar Amin compiled two buranjis entitled as Asam Buranji Sar and Asam Buranji respectively.

Another two metrical chronicles of 19th century, Belimamar Buranji and Kalibharat Buranjii which had been edited by S.K. Bhuyan and published by DHAS in a single work entitled Asammar Padya Buranji. The original chroniclers of these chronicles were Bisweswar Vaidyadhip and Dutiram Hazarika. Buranji Vivek Ratna by Maniram Barbhandar Dutta Barua Dewan was compiled in 1838 AD and the author was not only dealt with political history, but also the cultural aspect, mainly the religious history was depicted vividly in this compilation.

Authenticity of Buranji as a source material:

Buranji -writing was always considered as a pious work during the Ahom age and it was a symbol of aristocracy for the noble Ahom families. The family history once written was often copied by other family members and for this reason the several copies of the same buranji are found in the later period. During the initial period, buranjis were written by Chiring Phukan under the guidance of Burhagohain. Later on, a class of writers known as Lekharu khel was created only to do the work of writing buranji. All the writings were scrutinized carefully and preserved in the Gandhia Bharal under royal custody. On the other hand, the reports of the Ahom officials, notes of Kataki and Bairagi, official documents of census etc. all the valuable documents were kept in the Bharal. But the huge number of documents or buranjis were destroyed due to the humid climate of Assam and war situations; the approximate number of buranji found later was given by S.K. Bhuyan as hundred and fifty only.

The buranjis preserved in Gandhia Bharal were generally unbiased, based on true facts. The chronicler compiled it as per the instruction of the Rajmantri (Rajmantri was appointed from three officials, Burhaghain, Borgohain and Barpatragohain) and he was always careful about the facts based on truth, because buranjis must be recorded for the future generation. Therefore, the medieval history of Assam can be easily reconstructed by using the buranjis in a comparative manner. From the time of inception, the buranji writing process was continued till to the 19th century, which created a unique historiography in Assam. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee praised the Tai Ahom buranji with his valuable words in such a way that- "They (Ahoms) had a sense of actualities-the historical sense, and they gave to Assam unique thing in Indian literature, systematic chronicles of a country or a dynasty or an episode in a series of history book written in Ahom, and in Assamese, on the model of Ahom."⁹



The subject matter of the buranjis not only deals with the political events like war and treaty or royal activities; many interesting narratives like romantic story of Garama kunwari, courageous act of Nangblok Gabharu, patriotic story of Mula Gabharu and Lachit Barphukan, sacrifice of Joymoti Kunwari, political ethics of Atan Burhagohin etc. reflect the Ahom Age which are the most valuable and authentic source material of Medieval Assam. The historian can extract the data for constructing a socio-cultural history from such evidences. Specially the family histories and the Katha buranjis contain many non-political events through which one can easily follow the era. Moreover, the reports of Datyalia Barua, Chakiyal Barua, Kataki, Bairagi etc. all were considered as buranji and kept it in royal custody and these buranjis give many information about the diplomatic and economic history of the Ahom Age.

Sir Edward Gait certified the authenticity of the buranji in such a way that "The historicity of these buranji is proved not only by the way in which they support each other, but also by the confirmation which is afforded by the narratives of Muhammdan writers, wherever these are available for comparison. Their chronology is further supported by the dates on various records which have been collected and collated for the purpose of checking it, including those on about 70 Ahom coins, 48 copper plates, nine rock, and 28 temple inscriptions and six inscriptions on cannon."¹⁰

Collection and Revision of Buranjis:

During the reign of Gaurinath Singha, Captain Welsh came to Assam as per royal invitation to suppress the Moamariya rebellion and he was accompanied by Dr. J.P. Wade, and he collected two buranjis written in Assamese and Tai language. The Tai buranji was written in cotton cloth which attracted him a lot and he mentioned about it in his book "An Account of Assam".¹¹ He translated the Assamese buranji to English and submitted it to Captain Welsh. ¹²Dr. J. P. Wade was the first person to introduce buranji towards the outer world.

During the colonial period, Commissioner Jenkins invited Christian Missionaries to establish Christian Mission in Assam and in 1836 Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter arrived Assam. Next year in 1837 Miles Bronson also joined them and they collected many buranjis along with the Buranji of Kashinath Tamuli Phukan. It was edited by Nathan Brown and published in American Baptist Press in 1844. Another British historian Sir Edward Gait consulted seventeen buranjis while writing his "History of Assam". As mentioned earlier that in 1912 Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti (KAS) was

established to do research on buranji and culture of Assam. In 1935 the Padshah Buranji was published by KAS and it was edited by S.K. Bhuyan. Another buranji named Purani Asom Buranji was also published earlier in 1922. Some legendary personalities of Assam like Hiteswar Barbarua (1877-1938), Surya Kumar Bhuyan(1891-1965) had done great work on collection and revision of the buranjis. The Chakiyalar Buranji was recovered by Hiteswar Barbarua and he published it in Sahitya Sabha Patrika (5th session).¹³ He collected many buranjis from villages and rewrite a history of his own by using those data from buranjis named "Ahomar Din". As a Director of DHAS, S. K. Bhuyan had done such a great contribution towards the historiography of Assam that it could not be compared to any other historian of Assam. Some of his edited publications are as follows:

1. Asom Buranji, Harakanta Sadaramin (1930)
2. Kamrupar Buranji (1930)
3. Deodhai Asom Buranji (1932)
4. Asamar Padya Buranji (1932)
5. Tungkhungiya Buranji (1933)
6. Kachari Buranji (1936)
7. Jayantiya Buranji (1937)
8. Tripura Buranji (1938)
9. Asom Buranji, collected from Sukumar Mahanta (1945) etc.¹⁴

Another renowned litterateur cum historian Dr. Lila Gogoi personally collected twenty-seven buranjis and his Doctoral Thesis "The Buranji; Historical Literature of Assam" (1986), is an important work on buranji.

III. Conclusion:

The tradition of buranji writing among the Ahoms created a trend of historical literature in Assam and according to B.K. Kakati the buranjis present "a confluence of history and literature to be found in any modern literature in the pre-British period."¹⁵ It is found that most of the buranjis are anonymous. The chronicler might be conscious while writing the narratives of royal activities. Moreover, the buranjis are considered as official records, and those were subjected to governmental scrutiny from time to time. With the comment of Grierson we can conclude that "the Assamese are justly proud of their national literature. In no department have they been more successful in a branch of study in which India, as a rule, is curiously deficient."¹⁶

Notes and References:

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- [2]. Buragohain, P. K. Ahomar Adi Buranji, Sibsagar, 1946, p-7
- [3]. As to the total strength of Sukapha's followers number varying from 480-1080 are given in the Assamese chronicles. The Ahom Buranji and Deodhai Asom Buranji give the number as 9,000. It may be that Sukapha originally started with a few hundred men but their number swelled as he was receiving followers from amongst the conquered tribes from the Hukong valley to the Tipam-Namrup area in the Brahmaputra valley, so that when he reached Tipam he had several thousand men with him.
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