



Wet Rice Culture of Tai Ahom Community of Assam: A Study in Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

Rice has been playing an important role in the way of life and social development of the Tai people since time immemorial. The Mongoloid origin Tai groups inhabit mainly in large tracts of Southeast Asia viz. Southern China, Northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar. In India, the Tai people live in the Northeastern parts of Assam, Arunachal and Manipur who are known as *Tai Ahom*, *Tai Khamti*, *Tai Phake*, *Tai Aiton*, *Tai Khamyang*, *Tai Turung* and *Tai Lai*. Wet rice cultivation is very familiar to all the Tais of Southeast Asia and Northeast India. All most all the Tai communities are peasant communities and rice economy lays foundation of social organization and production technology as well as belief system of the Tais.

A Tai Mao group, which later came to be known as Ahom brought with them wet rice culture of the Tais when they migrated to the Brahmaputra Valley in 1228 A.D. They grew Ahom ethnic settlements centering rice field or the *pathar* where they engaged themselves in wet rice cultivation in low lying or marshy fields. Rice is the staple food of the Tai Ahoms and is considered as the root of Tai culture and civilization. Rice is attached every aspect of Tai Ahom culture such as rituals, folklore, festivals and ceremonies. In this discussion, I will try to highlight the wet rice culture of the Tai Ahom as indigenous agricultural practice, rituals and ceremonies related to wet rice cultivation, production technology and its continuity and changes at present context.

KEYWORDS: Wet rice cultivation, indigenous practice, Tai Ahom, culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Wet rice cultivation is very familiar to all the Tais of Southeast Asia. Rice has been playing an important role in the way of life and social development of the Tai people since time immemorial. Jean Barlie of Hongkong University writes, 'Wet-rice cultivation and a valley type of economy constitute the root of Tai culture'¹ All the

Tai groups of Southeast Asia, Southern China as well as Tais of Northeast India possess and practice this agricultural practice. All most all the Tai communities are peasant communities and rice economy lays foundation of social organization and production technology as well as belief system of the Tai Ahom community.

The Tai Ahom had their original homeland in Southern China. The legacy of the medieval agriculture and agrarian society in Assam is mainly attributed to the thirteenth century Tai immigration under Siu-Ka-Pha and his successors. Wet rice culture came with the Ahoms to this part of the country² The advent of the Tai Ahom in 1228 A.D. in the Upper Brahmaputra Valley and their contribution to Assam's agriculture is high-yielding and captivating. They grew Ahom ethnic settlements centering rice field or the *pathar* where they engaged themselves in wet rice cultivation in low lying or marshy fields.

1.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Rice is the staple food of the Tai Ahoms and is considered as the root of Tai culture and civilization. Tai society everywhere developed from small rice producing peasant community with custom and tradition emanating from relationship between rice and man within the ecological niche of the river valley. Hence, Tai Ahom migrated from Southern China in search of low-lying and marshy soil to the Brahmaputra valley where they engaged themselves in wet-rice cultivation. Rice is attached every aspect of Tai Ahom culture such as rituals, folklore, festivals and ceremonies. It is also a message of prosperity and richness, a guarantee for sustainable life, a cultural necessity and heritage. Wet rice is the integral part of Tai Ahom culture. It is their chief sustenance and an essential part in their social life. The introduction of wet rice cultivation by the Tai Ahoms transformed the socio-economic scenario of Assam. Thus, rice cultivation is a way of life for the Tai Ahoms.

1.2 Review of Literature



There are numerous books related to the study. Girin Phukon in his book 'Tais of Northeast India and Southeast Asia; A Study of Ethno-Cultural Linkage', is a much needed book for valuable information regarding wet rice culture of the Tai Ahom. In his above mentioned book he has discussed in the chapter IV 'Survival of Tai Cultural Elements: Linkage of Material Culture' about wet rice cultivation and other rituals and practices of Tai Ahom community and its linkage to other Tais of Southeast Asia. Another worth mentioned book related to the study is 'Medieval and Early Colonial Assam; Society, Polity and Economy' by Amalendu Guha. In this book Guha writes about the Tai migration and its impact on the rice economy. Nitul Kumar Gogoi, in his book 'Continuity and Change Among the Tai Ahom' also discussed about the various Tai traditions and its changing scenario in contemporary situation. Besides, there are numerous secondary sources viz. Assamese books, research articles, articles in souvenir related to this study.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The Tai Ahom tradition and their culture is one of the deserve attention topic of the learned section of this Northeastern and Southeast Asian people. The objectives of the study are:

- a) The study is undertaken to project the wet rice culture of the Tai Ahom people and its legacy in the Tai world.
- b) In this study an attempt is made to highlight the wet rice culture of the Tai Ahom as indigenous agricultural practice, rituals and ceremonies related to wet rice cultivation and its production technology.

1.4 Data and Methodology

In this work, the relevant data and information are collected from a wide range of ethnographic literature. Some data are collected from journals, periodicals, and internet files etc. Personal interviews and observation from the Tai Ahom people who engage in wet rice cultivation are also consider writing this paper. The approach of this study is historical and exploratory in nature. Both conventional and analytical method of research is employed in this paper.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTION

The research questions of the proposed work are:

- a) What was the origin of the wet rice culture of the Tai Ahom people of Assam?
- b) How the Tai Ahom wet rice culture related to other Tais of Southeast Asia?

- c) Is the wet rice culture of Tai Ahom people indigenous practice?
- d) What are the rituals and customs related to wet rice culture?

II. WET RICE CULTURE: ITS LEGACY IN THE TAI WORLD

The Ahoms are the modern representatives of great "Tai" race of the Mongolians. South-Western China is generally accepted to be the original homeland of the Tais. The "Ahom" an offshoot of the Shan branch of South-east Asia and entered the plains of Assam in the early part of the thirteenth century and established their kingdom comprising, in the course of time, the whole of Assam Valley and ruled for a long six hundred years. Eventually, they acquired the local name, "Ahom" from which in the course of time, the Brahmaputra Valley came to be known as "Assam"³ During their long reign, the Tai-Ahom have contributed a lot in the evaluation of composite Assamese society till lost their kingdom to the British in 1826 A.D. One of the notable contributions of the Tai Ahom is the wet rice cultivation.

Rice planting was found in the Southern part of China and mainland Southeast Asia since pre-historic times⁴ The Tai chronicles mention the migration of many Tai groups looking for a fertile plain to settle down. Tai people are expert agriculturist and used to live in the river valleys. Their preference was to settle on the land with ample supply of water. They settled in alluvial plains, river valleys and inter-mountain basins. The Tai people lived in the lowland where water is available. There is a popular sayings among the Tai people, '*mi nam cham pen na, mi na cham pen khao, mi khao cham yu Tai*' which means where there is water, there is rice field, where there is rice field there is Tai⁵ In the Northern part of China, Northern part of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, the Shan States of Myanmar and Northeast India, the Tai people practiced wet rice cultivation for more than 2000 years ago. Thus, the migrant Ahoms believed that they had a mission to fulfill in introducing better cultivation in a territory where large fields were 'lying fallow'. The Ahoms had a developed technique of growing transplanted rice on wet, permanent fields, whereas their tribal neighbours practiced wasteful shifting cultivation⁶ The rice productions build up Tai cultural identity. Rice is attached to the life of the Tai Ahom in such a way that in each and every aspect of culture such as rituals, festivals, folklore, dances, songs enormously.



2.1 RICE CULTURE AND THE TAI AHOM

The basic unit of Tai political organization was the *muongs* or group of villages, ruled by a Chao, or hereditary chief or lord. The *Baan Muong* concept of the Ahoms closely linked with the wet rice culture. All the groups of Tai families settled together and forming a small community which grew into a village called *wan* or *baan* in Tai language and several villages collectively became a principality or state known as *muong*. It became the traditional base of the social system of the Tai Ahom. Siu-Ka-Pha established a number of *baan* along with the *muong* nearby river valleys. Within a very short period numerous villages or *baans* came into existence. During his reign Siu-Ka-Pha established several *muongs* such as Muong Ti-pam, Muong Ha-bung, Muong Ti- Na Mao on the bank of the river Burhidihing (*Nam-Jin*), Dikhow (*Nam-Sao*), Disang (*Nam-Khoon*)⁷ Thus, there grew up Ahom ethnic settlement *baan* centering rice-field (*Na*) or the *pathar*, *pathar* or paddy fields concept is based on the Ahom (*Na*) field system. Even today most of the Ahom villages surrounding a field (*pathar*) may be found. As better rice farmers, the Ahoms conquerors devoted themselves to wet rice (*Sali*) cultivation and depended on the conquered for other kinds of tributes and services. Chronicles credits Siu-Ka-Pha with the establishment of three royal *khats* (farm or estate) through reclamation with the labour of the Moran servitors. Those are *Gachikala Khat*, *Bara Khowa Khat* and *Engera Khat*⁸ Like Siu-Ka-Pha, Suhungmung Dehingia Raja, Suklengmung, Pratap Singha, Jaidhaj Singha, Gadadhar Singha, Rudra Singha also extended wet rice cultivation in many (*Na*) fields and there are still many names bearing the suffix *Pathar* such as *Ahom Pathar*, *Da Pathar*, *Bam Pathar*, *Gohain Pathar*, *Miri Pathar*, *Mesloq Pathar*, *Rupahi Pathar*, *Basa Pathar* etc.

Paddy cultivation is usually carried on *rupit mati* i.e. low lands where water accumulated in the rainy season. There are some stages of wet rice farming of the Tai Ahoms. Firstly, at the beginning of the planting season, they plough the rice field with bullocks and buffaloes. Amalendu Guha writes, 'The Ahoms were an advanced plough-using tribe'⁹ Next, the work of reaping is exclusively done by the women with using sickle. Lastly, paddy grains are transported from rice field on men's shoulder. The labour in the rice field is basically supplied by family labour as well as by the members of the village community known as *Haori*. It becomes the habit of the villagers to take turn helping others working in the rice field. For the Tai Ahom people,

it is a pleasant opportunity to get together in the rice field and give helping hands to accomplish the job. The *Haori* is numbering twenty to thirty people depending on the area of the rice fields. But now many people are using tractor for ploughing, for transplanting paddy seedlings waged labours are used and grains are transported on tractor or push cart.(field observation) Hamilton wrote on his book "Account of Assam" that *Salidhan* or transplanted water rice forms three fourths of the whole crops. Some of notable species of *Salidhan* is *Hati Sali*, *Aki Sali*, *Ahom Sali*, *Laodubi*, *Pokhikola* etc. One way or another, glutinous rice is more appreciated than other rice.

2.2 RITUALS AND CUSTOMS RELATED TO THE WETRICE CULTIVATION

Rice culture is a part and parcel of Tai culture. The Tai Ahom people of Assam observe numerous rituals related to the planting and harvesting of wet rice cultivation. They perform agricultural rituals in order to protect rice production from natural disaster caused by spirit. They worshiped on the eve of any occasion related to cultivation, before planting of paddy, after harvesting, annual feast or first crops etc. As, the researcher is belongs to the Tai Ahom community all the rituals and ceremonies mentioned here are taken from personal experience and field observation.

The first rituals related to wet rice cultivation is worshiped the ancestor *Phi Dam* with offering of *Luk Lao* (rice-wine), fowl curry, young pseudostem of banana, steamed sticky rice, pounded rice powder, leafy vegetables etc. before sowing seeds to raise rice seedlings. It is performed at the ancestral worshiping place which is attached to the cooking room. After performing the rituals the family along with the priest takes *Luk Lao*, steamed rice with meat.

Next, during the time of transplantation of seedling another rituals is in which both the ancestor spirit and the spirit of rice are worshiped with a pair of areca nuts and betel leaves, lighted incense on banana leaf for expecting that the rice grains would be plenty and healthy cultivation. The paddy fields are made regular observation after seedlings. When paddy is grown up a ritual is performed to protect the growing crops from fungal diseases and other insects. They offering areca nut and betel leaf with mustard oil lamp in the paddy fields so that the insects and funguses are reduced and ready for harvesting. All family members go to the rice field in the harvesting time. On the last day of harvesting a special ceremony is also performed. Few healthy



rice plants are selected and tied carefully. Generally, three rice plants are uprooted and carried to the granary. However, these rice plants are hung outside the granary for few days. The Ahom priests perform a ritual known as *Hu Chung Khura* to keep the healthy rice plant into the granary. The Tai Ahom people in eve of any occasion related to cultivation, worship the household *Dams* (ancestor) and shown much respect and honour. Lastly, the Tai Ahom people observe another significant rituals having new meal of newly harvested rice. In this rituals, normally meat of hen, rice wine, sticky rice of newly harvested grains are offered to the ancestors. After worship is over the invited guests and family members are entertained. *Lakhimi adora* or *Lakhimi ana* and *Na-khowa* are some rituals performed by almost all agriculturist section of Assam which are said to be introduced by the Tai Ahoms in this part of India.¹⁰

2.3 RICE CULTIVATION AND WATER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The Tai ancestors had learned to live with nature in a way that gave them a better life. The Tai Ahoms are well acquainted with the techniques of irrigation and water management. They cleared up the marshy lands of Upper Brahmaputra Valley into most suitable paddy fields. The theory of "Water, irrigation, town and Chief" started making its way in the Upper Brahmaputra Valley¹¹ The Tais during their migration thousand years ago, they closely followed the course of the rivers to find the necessary conditions required for their way of life where they could turn wastelands into rice fields or *Nas*. With their knowledge of water management in lower and marshy land, the Ahoms highly preferred to settle in the midst of such jungle and marsh. They planted a late variety of paddy towards the end of the rainy season when the flood water receded. The soil was left soft and heavily muddy and therefore required minimal ploughing.

Wet rice cultivation is required ample water supply during the first half of the cultivation period. That is why in their long march towards Southeast Asia the Tai never failed to find fertile lands with plentiful water supply.¹² During the rule of Ahom kingdom, protection of food crops from natural disaster was regarded as important welfare activities. The Ahom administration had built hundreds of miles of embankments with a view to increasing the extent of wet rice cultivation¹³ British officer Francis Jenkins praises Ahom embankment system and said that the embankments were made not only in the main rivers but also in its tributaries. No parts of India possessed such strong river

embankments. The existence of irrigation system during the Ahom rule was also admitted by Robinson. The *Sali* fields are always enriched by natural floods and they retain their natural fertility.

III. OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

"Whatever the water is clear and the grass is tender, the Tai people will build houses, clear forest land for rice fields and make a living". This kind of Tai proverb gives us information about ancient dwelling system of the Tai Ahom. Some outcome and findings of the study are:

- a) The traditional cultural foundation of the Tais is agriculture.
- b) Wet rice cultivation and valley type of economy primarily constitute the root of Tai culture.
- c) The wet rice cultivation makes their economy rural based that molded their habits and life style.
- d) Rice cultivation is a part and parcel of Tai culture and also a strong message of prosperity of richness of Tai Ahom people.
- e) Most ceremonies within the ritual circle of the Tai Ahom people involve the use of rice.
- f) The Tai Ahom people perform agricultural ritual in order to protect rice production from natural disaster caused by spirit.

IV. CONCLUSION

"To say that wet rice (*sali*) cultivation was the essence of Shan culture does not mean that it was not there in Assam before. Brahmaputra valley was already a rich rice bowl supporting the big Kamrupa empire of olden times. *Sali* cultivation in the Assam plains was at least as old as the process of Sanskritization itself. There is ample evidence for that."¹⁴ - Amalendu Guha writes. Of the three varieties of rice viz. *ahu*, *bao* and *sali* – grown in Assam *sali* or wet rice cultivation is the most productive. Wet rice culture is traditional with the Ahoms. Their migration to Assam and expansion of their rule encouraged the extension of *sali* cultivation. Rice cultivation always used as an important basis for expansion of the original Tai colonization of the river valleys. Wet rice cultivation, the rice farming system of the Tais was a amazing invention. Every step of rice planting is related and co-existed with communal activities. It also acts as an instrument of cultural linkage among all the Tais rest of the world.



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