

Buranjis: Chronicles of Medieval Assam

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the historical importance, origins, and content of the Buranjis, the chronicles of the Ahom dynasty in Assam. It discusses the origin of the term 'Buranji' and presents different views among scholars. The study outlines the structure, classification, and compilation process of Buranjis, stressing their purpose as both official and private records that provide a valid account of the political, social, and cultural development of the Ahom kingdom. Focusing on the Tungkhungia Buranji, it documents major events such as dynastic changes, rebellions, and cultural transformations leading to the eventual British annexation. The paper concludes that Buranjis are important primary sources for understanding Assam's past and the legacy of the Ahom dynasty.

Keywords: Buranji, Ahom, Tungkhungia

Introduction:

Scholars have tried to define the word Buranjis. From the nineteenth century onwards, different scholars have given the word Buranjis different meanings and origins. John Peter Wade (1800), who was the first to compile the history of Assam, gives an interesting depiction of how the word originated. He says that the word Buranji originally comes from the word Roo-poot, where *roo* means knowledge and *poot* means documents. Padmanath Gohain Barua (1899) explains the meaning of the word Buranji as a store that teaches the ignorant. Following him, Chandra Goswami and Golap Chandra Barua have given a similar meaning to the word Buranji. Grierson arrived at a similar interpretation by dividing the word Buranji into three separate words: *bu* is ignorant, *ran* means teach, and *ji* is storehouse. And this became the standard etymological meaning of Buranji. In the early twentieth century, Assamese intellectuals tried to find the origin of the word Buranji. Scholars like Surya Kumar Bhuyan (1932) and Lila Gogoi (1991) both agreed that the word. Buranji is Tai-Ahom in origin and also had a connection with Southeast Asian ancestry. Bhuyan says that it was similar to the Japanese word boronji, meaning sacred letters. Lila Gogoi also tried to connect the word Buranji with some Tai words like *bu-lan-ji*, *bu-lan-chi* and *pu-lan-chi*, where the three words give the same meaning: documents which grandfather passed on to their ignorant grandsons. However, others like Numal Gogoi and J.N. Phukan refute the idea that Buranji is an Ahom word. Phukan argues that the word Buranji developed when the Ahom court was under Brahminical influence, before which there was no mention of it in any chronicles or manuscripts. He then traces how the word Buranji developed from Pali and was linked to Puran of Orissa, meaning Puran is and Pali means record. Yashmin Saikia (2004) also observes that the first chronicle in which the word Buranji appears is the Tungkhungia Buranji, written in 1804 A.D. Whatever may be the origin of the word Buranji, the meaning remains almost the same: documents or memories of the past.

Buranjis in a true sense were compiled chronicles of the records of the state documents such as reports from the military commanders and frontier governors, diplomatic epistles, reports of the Katakis (envoys) and Cakiyals (frontier wardens), records of Chang-rung Phukan (the royal engineer), day-to-day annals of the court, judicial and revenue papers. This compilation of Buranjis was a highly diligent and

responsible job, and it was done only by those who had easy access to state documents, under the orders of the Kings. Buranjis were written in simple and direct language, giving full information regarding the political, social, economic and cultural practices of the Tai-Ahoms until the 19th century.

According to Edward Gait (1926), in his work, 'History of Assam', he observes that the Tai-Ahoms, in writing their Buranjis, give a full, detailed account of their rule, and he also mentions a few Buranjis which date back to about 568 A.D, when the ancestors of the Tai-Ahom Kings are believed to have come down from heaven; however, the authenticity of these Buranjis cannot be very trustworthy. But they did contain a detailed account of the early period of the Tai-Ahoms in the 6th century, written in the Tai language. The Buranjis were divided into two groups, one under the state and another maintained privately by the noble family class. The private writing of Buranjis came into being only during the rule of Su-Hung-Mung (1497-1539). To prove noble ancestry, the Tai-Ahoms noble family class was asked to maintain Buranjis. The noble family groups followed the Royal counterparts in writing Buranjis, which led to an increase in the circle of authors and readers, and a new social class related to state power became the new patron of Buranjis. It should be noted that the private Buranjis were treated on par with the government Buranjis in terms of authenticity. Because the Buranjis were regarded as authentic records, they came to be accorded social recognition. Through the Buranjis, an individual's position in society can be established.

Buranjis never give the name of the writer; however, in some Buranjis we can find the names of the person under whose supervision the Buranji was written, such as in the Tungkhungia Buranji, which commenced under the supervision of Srinath Duara Bar barua in 1804 A.D but other than that there is no mention of who wrote it or the names of the writers. The writing of Buranjis was done under systematic and organised guidance of responsible officers. The writing of chronicles was mostly done by those who were well versed in the Tai-Ahom language, which was later replaced by the local language.

The Tai-Ahoms had three important Mo-Hung viz. the Mohan, Bailung, and Deodhais, who belonged to the priestly class of the Tai-Ahoms, and under them was the scribe who wrote or copied as per the instruction of the scholar-priest. The scribe belonged to the Chiring clan of Tai-Ahoms who had accompanied Su-Ka-Pha from their ancestral homeland (Basu, 1970). And by the sixteenth century, the local language, along with the Tai-Ahom language, also began to be used in writing the Buranji, for which a new khel called Lekharu was included in the Chiring clan of writing. The compilation of any Buranji first starts with the wish and aspiration of the king, who then passes on his wish to the Rajmantri under whose supervision the Buranji was compiled.

However, in the later period during the rule of Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769), the power of supervision was shifted to the Barbarua; under him were the Royal priests Deodhais, Bailung, Mohan, and the scribes Chiring and Lekharu, whose job was to compile in a proper narrative style. After which the Rajmantri or Barbarua made sure that the writing did not portray any bias or inaccuracy. The writing of the Buranji was mostly done in simple language of an elaborate and unemotional register of facts. The writers got complete immunity from the state from any retribution. He had to write a balanced representation of the facts free from partiality and predilections; a factually dependable and direct reflection of official documents. The Buranjis were written from sources such as state records, letters exchanged between nobles and high dignitaries, and other recorded state events, which were maintained in the Gandhiyal Bharal (Royal Archive). The Tai-Ahoms were very concerned about ancestry and the glorification of their forefathers; it was necessary, and a tradition of the Tai-Ahom royal household and Tai-Ahom noble family, to know the Tai-Ahom language and to maintain a Buranji. It was of high

prestige for a noble to possess a Buranji, and the Buranjis were the medium of imparting education to the new generations (Gogoi, 1991)

The materials used in writing the Buranjis were the Sachipat. The process of procuring started by selecting a 15- 16-year-old Sachipat tree, which had a breadth of 30-35 inches and measured 4 feet from the ground. The bark was removed, cut into strips, and dried in the sun for several days. The strips were rubbed with a board or by hand to peel off the outer scaly portion of the bark, kept for one night, and the next day cut into pieces of the required size and then put in cold water for one hour, after which the surface was scraped smooth with a knife. It was again dried in the sun for half an hour and then rubbed perfectly with a piece of burnt brick. A paste made of matimahis was next rubbed in and dyed yellow with arsenic, after which the stripes were rubbed again to gain a smooth texture like marble, and the process finally came to an end. Other than the Sachipat, few materials such as bronze metal, bamboo boards, and cloth materials such as muga and pat cloth were also used, but the Sachipat was most commonly used for writing (Gogoi, 1986)

The Buranjis are classified into various divisions, with each Buranji containing different materials; one Buranji talks about religion, and the other talks about the genealogy of the Ahom Royal family. They can be divided into: a) Katha Buranji: The word katha in Sanskrit means a piece of narrative composed in prose form, and it is more of a fictional nature. But in Buranjis, the Katha is used in quite a different manner; it is neither fictional nor poetic. It is a narrative prose of historical facts. Katha in its general sense is a description, a story, an account. In the Buranjis, the Katha was applied to historical accounts, for example, Bhaganiya Raja Katha, Jayantiya Raja Katha, Janma Katha, Kochar Katha, Mechar Katha, Nara Janna Katha (Gogoi, 1991). b) Carit Puthi: Biographical account of the Vaisnav Chatras Gurus. The aim of writing Carit Puthi is not just about factual events and incidents, but about the writer recording about his Guru who has touched and inspired him so that readers may feel the same inspiration. The writing style of these Buranjis was in verse (Duttabarua, 1977). The Damdora Vamsavali, Govinda Vamsavali, li and Santa Vamsavali were a few Buranjis written on Vaisnava Gurus. c) Deo Buranjis and Din Buranjis: The Deo Buranjis are nothing but myths and legends about the origin of the ancestors of the Ahom Royal family. It is about Lengdonn, the king of heaven, and his grandsons Khun Lung and Khun Lai, who are believed to be the ancestors of the Ahom Royal family. Whereas the Din Buranjis deal with human affairs, which begin with the establishment of kingdoms by descendants of Khun Lung and Khunlai. The Deo Buranjis, in comparison to the Din Buranjis, are small. In this class of Buranjis, we may find the account of the reign of Ahom kings in the Brahmaputra valley, along with a glimpse of Shan rulers of Northern Burma, etc., before Su-Ka-Pha. It also contains some accounts of Ahom administration in Assam along with the social aspect of the Ahom people; in these classes of Buranjis, the history of Ahom rule in Assam from Su-Ka-Pha till the advent of the British is recorded (Gogoi, 1991)

Lai-Lik Buranji and Lit Buranji: Buranjis are further classified into two types: Lai-lik Buranjis and Lit Buranjis. The Lai-Lik Buranjis are those where the writing part was very detailed and voluminous, including detailed reports transmitted to the king by the generals on the war, frontier governors, diplomatic correspondence with foreign countries, census reports, judicial records, reports of envoys, and day-to-day annals of the court. And in the Lit Buranjis, only small fragments of incidents are mentioned or narrated briefly, with particular focus. But its importance should not be mistaken by the amount of writing because in these Buranjis very important historical matters were recorded. Sometimes the writer even included their own personal experience, such as in the Ramsimhar Yuddar Katha, which

is a small volume confined only to the account of the battle of Saraighat. An eyewitness of the battle compiled it. The Buranjis, as we can see, were divided into vast classes, where each class holds its importance (Gogoi, 1991).

Buranjis are chronicles written from sources such as reports from Katakis and Cakiyals, records of day-to-day court annals, judicial and revenue reports, letters exchanged between the Ahom Kingdom and neighbouring kingdoms, and reports on war and other political events recorded in the court. The Buranjis mostly focused on political history, but they also cover different subjects.

During my study period, I have found that Buranjis also mention the ritual practices and mythical stories of the Ahoms. The Tai-Ahoms belong to the Tai-Shan race, and when they first came to the Brahmaputra valley, their belief was somewhat more animistic and focused on ancestor worship. But with the gradual assimilation of the indigenous tribes into the fold and the growing influence of Vaishnavism and Brahminical Hinduism, we can see that the Tai-Ahom lost their age-old beliefs, and new beliefs and practices came to be seen within the Ahom fold. The Ahoms believed in life after death. The Tai-Ahoms' funeral rites included burial. After the Ahom King dies, he was buried along with a few of his personal servants and his wives. For example, when Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha died, thirty attendants were buried along with him. The dead king was buried by placing him in a yellow coffin encased with a panned gold sheet within which the body was placed on a bed. Along with that, his clothes, utensils he used, areca nuts and betel leaves, and jewellery used by him were also buried. This burial tomb was known as Moidam and was in the shape of a dome (Saikia, 1998). It was recorded that when Mir Jumla invaded the Ahom Kingdom, he dug many of the Moidams and found treasure worth about 40,000 rupees.

Tungkhungia Buranji:

The 'Tungkhungia Buranji' was compiled under the supervision of Srinath Duara Bar Baruah. This Buranji, as a contemporary source book, is very valuable as the supervisor was a member of the Rangachila Duara family, many of whom held offices of Barbarua and Barphukan. The supervisor had served the Ahom government in several capacities. The Buranji deals with the Tungkhungia clan, which ruled for about 145 years. The Tungkhungia clan derived its name from the village Ting-Khang. The founder of this clan was Su-Teng, the son of Su-Hung-Mung. King Su-Hung-Mung (1497-1539) established his sons at different settlements such as Tipam, Namrupia, Charingia, Parvatia, Dihingia and Tungkhungia, and from these settlements different royal households emerged. There are fifteen chapters in this Buranji covering the period from Gadadhar Singha until finally the annexation of the Ahom Kingdom by the British. In the first chapter of the Tungkhungia Buranji, I find a salutation to the Hindu God Lord Krishna, which portrays the strong influence of Hinduism, and the ancient Tai-Ahom practices and religion were dying out. This chapter outlines the Kings of the Tungkhungia dynasty.

The **second chapter** deals with the period of the death of Chakradhvaj Singha and how the minister rises to power, which led to the period of anarchy, and then finally with the accession of Gadadhar Singha; a new line of rule came to be formed. Gadadhar Singha was the son of Gobar, who ascended the Ahom throne during the ministerial supremacy, which was short-lived. The accession of Gadadhar Singha can be seen in the third chapter. The accession of Gadadhar Singha to the throne finally brought peace to the Brahmaputra valley and an end to the anarchy. After he acceded to the throne, Gadadhar Singha brought back the lost territories of the

Ahom Kingdom from the Mughals and suppressed all kinds of conspiracies. He further consolidated his power by suppressing the power of the Satras, which was becoming very powerful during that time. He even confiscated many properties of the Satras. Gadadhar Singha did not repeat the mistakes which his predecessors made; he completely monopolised power in the hands of the king and suppressed any conspiracy. Due to this effort, his son, Rudra Singha, could rule the state very efficiently (Bhuyan, 1968).

RudraSingha's period begins in the **fourth chapter**, where it starts with Rudra Singha ascending the throne, and after which there was a grand celebration for a week. The period of Rudra Singha is considered to be one of the greatest periods of the Ahom rule. He not only suppressed the neighbouring tribes, but there were also many new developments during his period. There was also cultural exchange between Bengal and the Ahom kingdom. As there was peace and tranquillity in the kingdom, Rudra Singha also made elaborate plans to invade Bengal, for which he even gave special training to his officers. However, before he could fulfil his wish, he fell sick and died.

The **fifth chapter** deals with the reign of Siva Singha, who, under the influence and advice of his Guru, came to the throne as Bar Kunwari. Under the regime of Bar Kunwari, the old TaiAhom traditions were completely replaced by Hindu rituals. She even introduced the custom of burning the dead. One very important event during her period, which later led to one of the reasons for the downfall of the Ahom monarchy, was the introduction of celebrating Durga Puja. The BarKuwari forced the Satra Gurus to bow before the image of Goddess Durga and accept the offerings sacrificed to Goddess Durga. The Moamariya Satra Guru was also present and took it as a grave insult to his dharma. From the reign of Siva Singha, there is a lineage of weak rulers, and we can see the rise of the power of the nobles.

The **sixth chapter** begins with the succession of Pramatta Singha, in whose period we cannot see many important events. Still, it does give an elaborate grand ceremony of the coronation of the king, where kings from different countries were invited. Another was the construction of the city of Rangpur. The next **seventh chapter** begins with the ascendancy of Rajeswar Singha to the throne. The reign of Rajeswar Singha is important because it was in this period that an alliance was started between the Ahoms and the Manipur King, who even gave his daughter to the Ahom King. This chapter also deals with the influence of the Hindu Brahminical rites, where after the king's death the body was burned and the rituals were performed in Brahminical customs (Bhuyan, 1968).

The **eighth chapter** begins with the reign of Lakshmi Singha, in whose period Moamariya rebellions broke out. The rebellion was led by Raga Moran and Nahar Mohan, who were insulted by the Barbarua, and to take revenge, a rebellion was planned. They were supported by the Mayamara Satra, who had already been dissatisfied with Ahom rule since the reign of Siva Singha. The first rebellion broke out, in which Lakshmi

Singha was removed from his throne, and a new regime was started under the Moamariyas. However, this new regime was short-lived, and the Ahoms defeated the Moamariyas and Lakshmi Singha was reinstalled on the throne. The period of Lakshmi Singha is seen as a troubled time (Bhuyan, 1968)

In the **ninth chapter**, it begins with the succession of Gaurinath Singha to the throne, and the second rebellion of Moamariya begins. The Ahom monarch, not able to suppress the Moamariya rebellion, seeks help from the British East India Company. The Company agreed to help the Ahom king suppress the rebellion. Seeing the opportunity, along with the Moamariya rebellion, many other rebellions broke out at the same time. The chapter ends with the Company's suppression of the Moamariya and the signing of a treaty between the Ahoms and the British (Bhuyan, 1968). The **tenth chapter** starts with the

reign of Kamaleswar Singha. This chapter deals mostly with the uprising against the Ahom government and how the Ahom government tried to suppress it. Gaurinath Singha suppressed the Moamariya rebellion, but when it rose again, Purananda Buragohain, as an able minister, suppressed it. After the tenth chapter, the eleventh to the fifteenth chapters are very short chapters which mostly deal with the succession of the weak rulers and the rise in the power of ministers, which finally leads to the invasion of the Nara and then finally the intervention of the British East India Company, which then leads to the end of the Ahom authority in the Brahmaputra valley. Thus, the Tungkhungia Buranji comes to an end with the shifting of Ahom supremacy in the region to the British (Bhuyan, 1968).

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Conclusion:

The Buranjis play a unique and invaluable place in the historical tradition of Assam. They served as official records that preserved the political, administrative, social, cultural, and religious life of the Ahom kingdom over several centuries. Scholars argue regarding the origin and etymology of the term *Buranji*; there is broad agreement that it signifies a record or repository of the memories and events of the past. Compiled under royal patronage by trained scribes and supervised by high-ranking officials, these chronicles were based on official state documents, diplomatic correspondence, military reports, judicial records, and court annals, making them among the most reliable historical sources of pre-colonial Assam.

The Ahom state's highly organised administrative structure is evident in the systematic writing of the Buranjis. It emphasised factual correctness, objectivity, and chronological narration, while the use of materials such as sachipat ensured their preservation for future generations. The classification of Buranjis into Katha Buranjis, Carit Puthis, Deo and Din Buranjis, and Lai-Lik and Lit Buranjis exhibits the variety of the contents, ranging from political history and genealogy to mythology, religion, and biographies. The Tungkhungia Buranji is principally the most significant because it provides a detailed and contemporary account of the Tungkhungia dynasty, tracing the political developments from the accession of Gadadhar Singha to the final annexation of the Ahom kingdom by the British.

In South Asian historiographical traditions, the Buranjis represent one of the richest sources. Their systematic recording of events and broad treatment of governance and society distinguish them from many contemporary historical sources. Despite certain limitations, such as occasional legendary elements, they remain vital as the primary sources for reconstructing the history of the Ahom kingdom and the wider region of Assam.

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