



## MANUSCRIPT LITERATURE AND THE TRADITION OF MANUSCRIPT WRITING OF THE TAI AHOM OF ASSAM: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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### ABSTRACT :

*Manuscripts have always remained a major source of knowledge of any society. This handwritten composition made on various tools such as tree bark, palm leaves, cloths, paper etc. Ancient Assam has a long history in this cultural field. All the Tais of Northeast India possess a rich manuscript culture. The Mongoloid origin Tai groups inhabit mainly in large tracts of Southeast Asia viz. Sothern 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.*

*A Tai Mao group, which later came to be known as Ahom brought with them Tai scripts and written language when they migrated to the Brahmaputra Valley in 1228 A.D. The manuscripts found in Tai Ahom language are as old as the advent of the Ahoms to Assam. They had recorded all their significant events in manuscript form. All the Ahom documents and literary works were compiled in their own script and language. The Tai Ahom language is now found in manuscript form. Most of the Ahom manuscripts usually written in Sanchi tree bark, the bark of aloe tree (*Aquilaria agallocha*) dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Tai Ahom manuscripts represent all aspects of political events, tradition and culture of the Ahom people and it also played a vital role in maintaining the Ahom's cultural identity.*

**Keywords: :** Manuscript, Tai Ahom, Culture, Identity, Assam.

### I.Introduction:

The world is passing through a revolution in the field of documentations. Manuscript is a handwritten document. Manuscripts are knowledge content of significant events. This distinct



handwritten composition writes on paper, tree bark, cloth, palm leaf, rock, metal or other materials which provides information on significant events or processes in history. So, manuscripts include all types of early writing which are not printed and published. In other words, handwriting of any kind whether on paper or any other material in contradiction to printed materials are called manuscripts (Sahoo, *et.al.* 2013) 'Antiquity and the Art Treasure Act, 1972' says that a manuscript is a handwritten document of having scientific, historical, literary or aesthetic value which is not less than seventy-five years old. Manuscripts create a bridge between the knowledge cultures of the past and present.

India is one of the largest and richest collections of manuscripts documents. This manuscripts played vital role in maintaining community identity and existence of different civilizations and nation's cultural affluence. There are thousands of manuscripts scattered in all over India in public and private collections. These manuscripts are spread in different libraries, monasteries, temples, museums, several private institutions as well as in households. We may call India has possessed not only the largest numbers of manuscripts but also the largest number of repositories. In ancient times knowledge system was passing through generation to generations by rich oral transmission. In later, with the development of script and writing materials communication and wisdom converted to written form in rock, clay table, copper plates, handmade paper, tree bark, palm leaves and other materials. The 11th century marked the birth of manuscript illustration in India with the illumination of the palm-leaf Jain and Buddhist manuscripts.

In Assam, the literature written and oral gives us a glimpse of bright prospect about the growth and development of Assamese language and literature from the time immemorial. Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan had mentioned "It is generally accepted that Aryan Culture had taken its root in Assam since very early times. The ancient kingdom of Kamrupa or Assam has accordingly been swept by a wave of Hindu civilization which has maintained its cultural homogeneity with the rest of India. The literature produced by a people like the Assamese is thus essentially Indian in spirit, and its individuality is derived from the impact of local circumstances, physical and political" (Bhuyan, 2012) This cultural hegemony with the rest of the country transmitted through the *puthis* or the manuscripts.



Assamese diverse cultures are some preserved in written records, while others are orally transmitted with myth and legends, folksongs and folktales. Ancient Assam encompassed with learned peoples and owing to the encouragement and patronage given by the monarchs, scholars came to Assam from different places. Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang and the various copper-plate inscriptions of ancient Assam bear testimony of the scholarship, highly intellectual and presence of learned monarch and people in Assam. The literary genius and attainments of the Assamese people of ancient times are preserved in the texts of the rock inscriptions and copper plates which were compiled with great care and reminiscent style. Maheswar Neog in his article “Manuscripts and Manuscriptology in Assam” had mentioned that in ancient Assam copperplates and stones were used as materials on which to inscribe documents of royal grants of land etc. Such inscriptions have been discovered in various parts of Assam, and the earliest of them relate to the Hindu kings, who ruled Assam (kamarupa) from the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. But literary works written or copied in this early period of Assam’s history are nowhere to be found today (Neog, 2004)

The common language of these inscriptions is Sanskrit. The earliest of these inscriptions, the Umachal and Nagajari Khanikargaon rock inscriptions, belong to the 5<sup>th</sup> century and written in a script which was nearly identical to the eastern variety of the Gupta script (Lahiri, 1991) The Nidhanpur Copper Plate inscription of 7<sup>th</sup> century Kamrupa King Bhaskarvarman and King Harjaravarman’s copper plate inscriptions (9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) are worth mentioning in which scholarly composer’s glimpses the dignity and views they held. King Vanamaladeva and King Ratnapala were other names of learned men which bears testimony of literary masterpieces in ancient Assam. One vast means of conserving and transmitting knowledge and culture was through the *puthis* or manuscripts. It has been said that the Assamese people preserved their regular chronicles of their country from very early times. According to S.K. Bhuyan, the chain of historical events or chronicles of Assam may classify in three main heads:

- a) Chronicles of Kamarupa kings till the advent of the Ahoms in the first half of 13<sup>th</sup> century.
- b) Chronicles written and patronage by the Tai Ahom kings of Assam till their rule in 1838 and even later prepared by the learned Tai Ahom *Pundits* of Assam.



c) Chronicles of countries other than Assam.

The above mentioned chain of historical events, however, since the last 600 years, has been carefully preserved, and their authenticity can be relied upon. The ancient manuscripts of Tai Ahom language during the Ahom period specially in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Assam are the one of the most valuable and significant assets of Assamese literature. S.K. Bhuyan was rightly pointed that as far as is known at present, Assamese literature in the strict sense of the term came into existence in the thirteenth century (Bhuyan, 2012)

**II. Objectives of the Study:** The process of writing and preserving the manuscript culture among the Tai families has great cultural value. This inherited ancient Tai heritage has been developed in this region undoubtedly represent Tai culture. So, the primary objectives of the undertaken work are:

- 1] To trace the origin and development of the manuscript culture of the Tai Ahom.
- 2] To Make study the tradition of manuscript writing of the Tai Ahom and,
- 3] To project the literary and historical value of the manuscript possessing by the Tai Ahom community.

### **III . Methodology:**

In this study, the relevant data and information will be collected from a wide range of ethnographic literature about Tai Ahom manuscript culture and personal field observation. Secondary data sources will base upon the reviews and references, journals, books, periodicals and internet. The methodology apply for the study will conduct by taking formal interviews with the few manuscript possessing local people of Charaideo district who know the Ahom language. The data and collects information are analyzed and empirically verify with cross examination.

### **IV. Analysis and Discussion:**

#### **The Tai Ahom: Origin and their Migration:**

The generic name 'Tai' denotes a race of people of Mongoloid origin whose main habitat at present is the region, in South-east Asia, extending from Assam in the west to



Kwangsi and Hainan in the east and from the interior of Yun-nan in the north to the southernmost extremity of Thailand in the south (Gogoi, 2001) The origin and early history of the Tais are still fictitious or assumed and not conformity with historical records. Various theories have been propounded in this regard from time to time. B.J Terwiel has written “The Tai speaking peoples from the most numerous and widely spread peoples in Mainland of Southeast Asia. They first became recognizable as such in the first millennium A.D. in what is now Kuangsi Province in Southern China. In the middle of the eleventh century they became embroiled in a long and fierce war with the Chinese, which ended in a resounding defeat of the Tais. Hereupon many Tais suddenly began migrating southwards and south-westwards into the region of Mainland of Southeast Asia. They fanned out rapidly, and within a few hundred years had conquered most of the vally regions where they are now found: in northern Vietnam, in Laos, in all of Thailand, in Northern Myanmar, in the Chinese province of Yunan, and in Northeastern India. At present there are probably a hundred million speakers of Tai languages” (Terwiel, 2001)

The Ahoms are the westernmost of these Tais. It has been suggested that the Ahoms came from Mong Mao-Lung. Prof. J. N. Phukan writes a Tai state of that name has been in existence in South-western Yunnan till its abolition in 1952. The name however still persists and the Chinese call it Ruili and is now situated in the Dehong Dai-Singpho Autonomous Prefecture. Elsewhere scholars admit that the Ahoms belonged to the Pai-i (Tai Yai) of the China border and were non-Buddhists. The Tai alphabets of the Dehong Prefecture had the greatest similarity with those of the Ahoms prior to 1952 is yet another positive evidence in support of the contention that they came from Mong Mao in Yunnan (Barpujari, 2016)

They have migrated in the thirteenth century from the Hukawang Valley (located on the upper reaches of the Chindwin River in present day Myanmar) across the Patkai Range in the Brahmaputra Valley of upper Assam where they have established their political sovereignty under the first Ahom king Siu-ka-Pha. The name or rather the title ‘Tai’ undoubtedly refers to the race whereas the designation ‘Shan’ said to be of Burmese origin, means probably “Highlanders” (Gogoi, 2016) The medieval history of Assam may be said to have actually begun from the advent of the Ahoms, an offshoot of the Shan or Tais, early in the thirteenth century and their conquest of the country (Barpujari, 2016)



### **Tai Ahom and Manuscript Culture:**

The Tai people from Mong-Mao are called 'Tai Ahom' in this region. The Ahoms have never referred to themselves as Shan or Sam or by any of its Assamese variants including Ahom in their own literature or *buranjis*, written in Tai. The word 'Ahom' is nowhere to be found in their Tai-Ahom literature (Gogoi, 2016) With the loss of independence and changed circumstances they generally call themselves not Tai but by the local name Ahom which is little known to the rest of the Tais of Asia. They acquired the local name 'Ahom' from which in the course of time, the Brahmaputra Valley came to be known as 'Assam' (Baruah, 1972) They brought with them their own language and scripts. The Tai Ahom language and its scripts are as old as the advent of the Ahoms to Assam in 1228 A.D. The Ahoms brought with them a good number of manuscripts written in Tai Ahom language. They also began to write the chronicles as per the direction of the prince Siu-ka-Pha from the very beginning of their journey to Assam and continued the practice till the end of the Ahom rule. It is said that the Ahoms were the pioneers in writing history in this northeastern region.

The Tai Mao of the Mong Mao kingdom had a well-developed system of government. It is obvious; therefore, the Tai Mao Ahoms had planted the same systems in their new land. The Ahom chronicles (*buranji*) written in Ahom (Tai Mao) language (the Assamese language *buranji* with which many of us familiar and depend for historical information were not in existence till the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) which are our primary source, clearly mention that Prince Siu-ka-pha on the eve of his departure from Kieng-Sen Mao-lung, the capital of Mao-Lung; told his brother King Siu-khan-pha that he was going to rule (kin) Mong Pa-kam lying to the west (*kao tak pai kin Mong Pa-kam ban tuk nuk non nam ba nai* "I go to eat Mong Pa-kam that lies to the west where birds go to sleep") (Phukan, 2003)

The Tai Ahom chronicles which is in manuscript form were written in Ahom, a language of Chinese Thai origin. They were broadly divided into two categories *Deo Buranji* and *Din Buranji*. *Deo Buranji* is legendary and mythical account of the origin of the world. It contains the story of *Leng-don*, the lord of heaven, who sent down his grandson, *Khun-lung* and *Khun-lai* to *Mung-ri-mung-ram* and the account of a subsequent quarrel between the two brothers (Gogoi, 1986) *Din Buranji* deals with human affairs. It is bigger numbers than the *Deo*



*buranjis*. *Din Buranji* contains mainly the political events of the Ahom king in Assam along with glimpses of Shan rulers of Northern Burma prior to Sui-ka-pha. It also lights the accounts of Ahom administration along with social and cultural aspects of the Ahom people. Thus, the custom of writing manuscript of the important events of political as well as socio-cultural history of their reign started by Sui-ka-pha and followed it by his successors. All these manuscripts were written in Tai Ahom script and language.

The Ahom priestly class (*Mohan*, *Deodhai* and *Bailung*) were the repository of the Ahom language and customs who consciously preserved Tai Ahom historical consciousness. They used to study and writing manuscripts of important political events, religion, divination as well as various rituals and customs of Tai Ahom people. Dr. Birendra Kumar Gohain remarks that these pundits were to teach history, genealogies, culture and politics to the nobles and their sons and at the command of the king they used to consult the books of astrology and divination at the time of the coronation of a king or at the time of war or battle (Gohain, 2011) So, it is believed that most of the important Tai Ahom manuscripts were written down in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During the first 300 years of Ahom rule in Assam, the Tai Ahom manuscripts were vast and voluminous numbers, but the Ahom literature lost its position since they adopted Assamese language. Now, the Tai Ahom manuscripts mainly confined to the persons who can read and interpret the language with any amount of accuracy.

Sir George Scott a well known authority on the Shans pointed out that the first wave of the Tais entered Northern Burma two thousand years ago. They have no traditions of their pre-historic wanderings, but later on developed a tradition of writings chronicles. (Gogoi, 1986) The Ahoms who migrated from North Burma are indisputably Shans who had an age-old tradition of writing chronicles, known to them as *buranji*. The accounts in the Ahom language *buranjis* of the early period reflected a picture of that form, administrative arrangements and other features. A study of the contemporary Ahom language *buranjis* reveal that the early Ahom government was basically the same with those of other Tai groups in Burma, Thailand and Southern China. Consequently, most titles and terms relating to kings, officials and other functionaries of the state which are found in the Ahom –language *buranjis* are also found among the Shans or the Thais. (Phukan, 2021)



Amyakhen Gohain, argued that the Ahom had maintained relations with the Tai in Burma throughout the first 300 years of their settlement, and hence the Tai language had flourished in the Ahom kingdom during that period. When Sukapha (reigned 1228-1268) took his army to Assam, he found the Tai who had been living there already. The Ahom Buranji called them 'those who were already there' (*phu-kow-an-kao*). In the reign of Sukapha there was an exchange of envoys between the Muang-Dun-Sun-Kham (Assam) and Muang Mao. In 1382 Sudangpha (reigned 1397-1407) recorded that it had been already eight years since his kingdom exchanged envoys with Muang Mao. The implication was that during the 140 years between these two reigns there had been regular contact between these Tai kingdoms. (Gohain, 1994)

#### **Tradition and Continuation of Tai Ahom Manuscript Writing in Assam:**

Prior to the advent of the Ahom, the system of recording events was not known to the people of the Brahmaputra Valley. In other words, chronicle writing was not known to them. It was the Ahom who had introduced the system of writing chronicles in this part of India. Hence, it is an original contribution of the Ahom to Assam. (Phukon, 2016) This system was brought by them from Mung Mao, Yunan of South China. Important events occurred in the reign of each king were recorded in time sequence. The recording was done by scholar priest called 'mo' (meaning learned *pundit*); and they were the custodians of all religious lore. It was a very old Tai tradition. This practice was continued in the Ahom kingdom till the end. Hence, there is a considerable amount of chronicles of Tai Ahom language. Much later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D. this system was adopted in the Assamese language, and as a result *Buranjis* in the Assamese language were produced. Thus, in the Assamese language *Buranjis* are of fairly recent origin. The Ahom were thus the first people to introduce this system. It is from the accounts in the *Buranji*, the history of Assam of the Ahom period can be known. They are very original sources of the history of Assam. (Phukon, 2016) The Ahom manuscripts are the precious relics of the past. All the Ahom documents and literature were compiled in their own script and language for the first 300 years in Assam, later the royal language was replaced gradually by the dominating Assamese language.



The Ahom priest who accompanied Siu-ka-pha from Mong-Mao were literate and wrote manuscripts in the script that was prevailing there during the twelfth-thirteenth century. They kept records of all important events in their language and script (*buranji*). They also had bought with them, other manuscripts containing procedures of performing rites and rituals, calculation of auspicious time, calculation of days and months (*phoe ban*), divination by chicken thigh-bone, *lak-ni* system, etc. Their descendants also continued writing chronicles and other works in the original language and script in Ahom. Thus, huge amount of writings of Ahom language and script was produced during the Ahom rule. Despite the loss of such manuscripts due to human and natural causes, many are still in existence. (Phukan, 2003)

The significance of the Tai Ahom language is essential from its historical point of view. As most of the (almost all) ancient historical documents and manuscripts are written in this language, it is important for the historians and scholars alike to have comprehensive knowledge of the language to explore the history of Assam. The tradition of documenting historical and political events was practiced right from the Su-ka-pha's reign. (Buragohain, 2013) Apart from the royal patronage, other officials and ministers from the Ahom Court also patronized recording their own genealogy as well as important political events of the time. This continued through many generations.

This particular record of important events is known as *Buranji*. The *buranji*, a genere of writing, a distinct from of literature, is an outstanding contribution of the Ahoms. (Gogoi, 1986) As the Ahom has own script and language, *buranji* writing was done in that Ahom language till the end of the sixteenth century. Greirson writes, "The Assamese word for 'history', which is an Ahom word, viz., *bu-ran-ji*, literally means, 'ignorant-teach-store', a store of instruction for the ignorant" The Ahom adopted the art of writing just to keep records of their glorious past; and through the recounting of those events they tried to provide inspiration to the growing generation. It was even believed that the future could be ascertained by consulting hand-written chronicles. (Gogoi, 1986)

The compilation of *buranjis* was treated as a highly responsible job, and the work was done under the orders of kings and of the high dignitaries, who only could have easy access to state documents, such as, reports from the military commanders and frontier governors,



diplomatic epistles, reports of the *Kakatis* (emissaries) and *Cakiyals* (frontier wardens), records of the *Chang-Rung-Phukan* (the royal engineer), day-to-day annals of the court, judicial and revenue papers and chronicles already compiled. The practice of writing buranjis has been one of the greatest gifts of the Ahoms. (Gogoi, 1986) The migrated Tai Ahom had an old tradition of writing chronicles, known to them as buranji and all the buranjis of the Ahoms of their first 300 years were compiled in their own script and Tai Ahom language hence, there is a considerable amount of chronicles in Tai Ahom language. Much later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D. this system was adopted in the Assamese language, and as a result *Buranjis* in Assamese language were produced. Thus, in the Assamese languages buranjis are of fairly recent origin. (Phukon, 2016) We may say it is from the accounts in Tai Ahom buranjis and manuscripts, the history of Assam of the Ahom period can be known. Though there were mass of archaeological and epigraphic evidences to prepare a systematic history of this region, viz. ruins of palaces, temples, rock and copper plate inscriptions, land grants, historio-mythological work, *peda-kakat*, *vamsavalis*, judicial documents etc. the Tai Ahom manuscripts furnish profuse materials for the construction of a comprehensive historical and cultural history of the Tai Ahom people as well as Assamese society. It is generally speaking a rich and reliable source material for the reconstruction of the Tai Ahom culture.

### **Findings of the Study:**

Among the Ahoms, the priestly class *mo* (meaning learned *pundit*) has made the greatest effort and has played the most important role in the preservation of Tai language, culture and historical consciousness. Until the kingdom was lost to Britain completely in 1838, they wrote the Ahom Buranji in Tai language. It is this priestly class which has consciously preserved and handed down the over generations the Ahom language and custom. Though they became poor after the kingdom was lost to the British, they continued to fulfill their responsibility as the intellectuals of a nation. (Nartsupha & Wichasin, 2007) Tai Ahom manuscripts are available with some priestly families as their valuable heritage. The Tai Ahom language is now found in manuscript form. It has a written form and some priests can still read and write their language and use it for ritual and cultural purposes, like marriage, ancestor worship and other social ceremonies.



The Ahom historiography was systematically organised with responsible officers. They had a guild of scholars' priest viz. *Mohan, Deodhai and Bailung*. They have known Ahom language, tradition and history and guided in the king's administration. They were not only specialised in writing and reading the Ahom scriptures, but also the custodians of original culture, traditional lore, and performing rituals and ceremonies of the community. As the Deodhais, Bailungs, and Mohans were well versed in the Ahom language and literature, they were engaged in writing *buranjis*. As such they were the founders of the historiography in Assam. (Gogoi, 1986)

The Ahom ruler took special interest of recording their important and significant events through writing *buranjis* or chronicles. Dr. Lila Gogoi remarks that among the Ahoms knowledge of the *buranji* was, more or less, an obligatory part of their education and culture. According to the custom of the country, knowledge of the *buranji* was an indispensable qualification of a person belonging to Ahom nobility. Therefore, every family of distinction arranges to possess a *buranji* for the enlightenment and edification of the children. The *buranjis* were treated as religious scripture and carefully preserved. Apart from chronicles compiled by the royal historiographer, numerous *buranjis* of different orders, topics and treatments were also compiled in the noble families. Thus, chronicles came to be written throughout the country. (Gogoi, 1986) The Ahom kings specially appointed officers and scribes for the smooth management of the manuscript writing. The Ahom king engaged a few artisan clans' viz. *sancikatiya, khanikar, lekharu* etc. to prepare the Tai Ahom manuscripts. Besides, the manuscripts were preserved in the *Gandhia bharal* (the royal archive) and two responsible officers namely *Gandhia Phukan* and *Gandhia Barua* was entrusted to look after it. Thus, from the very beginning of the Ahom rule they had properly developed their writing of Tai Ahom chronicles or manuscripts which had continued till the end of the Ahom rule.

## **V. Conclusion:**

Knowledge of Ahom history from Tai documents is only just emerging. The Ahom *Buranji* and other Tai documents show that Tai society and culture had their own identity, distinct from the Hindu society and culture of India. Knowledge from the Ahom *Buranji* and other Ahom documents supports the Tai school of Ahom historical study. (Nartsupha &



Wichasin, 2008) After the British occupation of this region in 1826 A.D, the Tai Ahom gradually reduced to the status of distinct community which is mainly inhabited in the upper Assam specially in the district of undivided Sivasagar, Lakhimpur, Golaghat, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji and Tinsukia and their population is about to 25-30 lakhs. Ironically, the once royal language used in the Ahom court as well as for documenting historical records of Ahom Dynasty is now limited only to a few hundred speakers and most of the speakers belong to the priestly class. (Buragohain, 2013) So, it is very important to access the ancient Tai Ahom manuscripts and its historicity regarding the medieval Assam history by comparative study and to explore the testimony of the glorious past of Assam.

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