TAI ELEMENTS IN THE PLACE NAMES OF ASSAM

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INTRODUCTION:- The word 'Tai' is a generic name denoting a great branch of Mongoloid population of Asia the present inhabitant of the Tai people extends from Assam (North-East India) in the west to Kwangsi and Hainan in the East and from the interior of Yunnan in the North to the southern most proximity of Thailand in the South, i.e. 90° East-180° East longitude and 6° North to 33° North latitude. The Tai groups and sub-groups in this vast region are known by innumerable other local names, which at times tend to obscure their racial identity such as in Burma, 'Shan', in Thailand 'Siamese', in Laos 'Lao' (Cambodia), in Yunnan 'pie' and in Assam (the Brahmaputra valley) as Tai-Ahoms, Tai-Phake, Tai-Khamti, Tai-Turung, Tai-Ai-ton and Tai-Khamyang. But the members of this great race, whatever the local groups to which they may belong, call themselves 'Tai'.

The Tai-Ahoms, a branch of the great 'Tai' race, conquered the valley of Brahmaputra, Assam in the early part of the 13th century (1228 A.D.) under the leadership of Chao lung Sukapha. Sukapha laid foundation of a Tai state here which lasted for nearly six hundred years.

This state was known as Pragjyotishpur and Kamarupa in early times. Sukapha renamed the state as
Mung-Dun-Chun-Khām; Mung=country, Dun=full of, Chun= garden, Khām=gold; a country full of garden of gold.

The Āhoms brought into being during their reign in Āssām a stabilized polity, a balanced society, a liberalized economy and a flourishing cultural life. Their endeavours left their impress on all aspects of life and culture, literature—particularly the 'Buranjies' (Chronicles), music, dance, drama, architecture, sculpture and painting even today bear the testimony of the achievements made in this field during the six hundred years of their rule. In the words of Dr. B.K. Baruā "the most distinctive aspects of the period were the geographical and racial unification of the country, stabilization of the political institutions, organisation of the economic, social and religious system and finally the rise of nationalism". In the same context a noted historian of Āssām Dr. S.K. Bhuyan rightly remarks, "The Āhoms as a sovereign power have ceased to exist since 1826 A.D., but visible traces of their rule still exist in different form".

The Āhoms as they advanced into and conquered Āssām used their own language. This language of Āhoms were a branch of Siṃsese-Chinese group which is a member of Sino-Tibetān family. Inspite of the fact that the Āhom Rulers had their own manners and customs, language, and religious rites, they didn't impose their language, culture and religion on the conquered. On the other hand by inter marriage, by speaking the language of the indigenous people and by adopting their culture, the Āhom conquerers gradually became one with the
conquered. Finally, in course of time they had to give away to the language of the people, i.e. Assamese and the language got confined to the priestly clans—the Deodhais, the Bāilungs, the Mohans etc. But today most of the people have rejuvenated their language.

In the formation of the modern Assamese language the following groups of people have contributed, such as the Indo-Chinese, particularly Austro-Asiatic-Khāsi, Kolāriān and Mālayān; Tibeto-Burmāns-Bodo, Koch, Rābhā, Hojāis, Lālung, Gāro, Morān, Borāhi, Chutia etc. and 'Tāi', Tāi-Āhom, Tāi-Phāke, Tāi-Khāmyāng, Tāi-Turung, Tāi-Āiton, and Tāi-Khāmti. Except the Tāi-Āhoms, these later-migrated Tāi groups have been continuing their language and culture as before with local variations.

The Tāi elements in place names owe their origin to association with Lakes, Rivers, Trees or some striking natural characteristics or incidents that happened in the locality. Similarly, river names are associated with terms indicating noise, breaking terrain, quality, specific gravity etc. A good number of these places still retain the original names and are currently in use mostly in the district of Golāghāt, Jorhāt, Sibsāgar, Dibrugarh, Tīnsukhā, Lakhimpur and Dhemāji. The Tāi-Āhom historical documents, Buranji or Chronicles abound in such names, in short, Āhoms were well-acquainted with the places under their domain.

1. **RIVER NAMES** :- As we have mentioned earlier a handful of Tāi elements can be traced in river names of Assām. The Tāi Āhom
equivalent for water is 'Nām' and occurs as a first syllable of many river means;

Dilih  :- Nām-Khun  :- Nām - water, Khun - muddy (in Dibrugarh District : name not in use).

Dorikā  :- Doi-hilly, rik-connect, ā-wide, a wide hilly rivulet located in Sibsāgar District (Still in use).


Nām-dāng  :- Nām - water, dāng - red ; this name is still prevalent in Sibsāgar district.

Nām-Dāo-Phi  :- Nām - river or water. Dāo - a star Phi - god. River of the star God. The genuine Tāi-Āhom name for river Brahmaputra. A holy river. (The Tāi name is not in use).
Nāphuk<Naṁ-Phuk :–
Nāṁ — water,
Phuk — white,
(in Sibsāgār District: name not in use).

Nāṁ-Sāi :– Nāṁ — River, water, Sāi — Sandy,
A sandy river, Āssāṁ-Arunāchāl Border. The name is still in use.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PLACES :– The nomenclatures of the place was always on
particular characteristics and these characteristics still are
in prevalence :–

Bāntung :– Bān-God, Phi ; tung-meadows or
field ; devottar land, the land
earmarked for the temple,
(Gaskilākhāt, in Sibsāgar
district). The name is still in
use.

Bāruk<Bārnuk :– Bān-ruk ; Bān-village ; ruk-six;
counstellation of six villages,
in Sibsāgar district. Still in
use.
Chaiyāng  :- Chaiyāng<Che-āng; Che-town, āng-tradition-al ancestral; traditional or an ancestral town. Still in use in Sibsāgar district.

Charideo  :- Charāideo<Che-rāi-doī; Che-town; rāi-prominent; doi-hill, mountain; a prominent place on the hill top in Sibsāgar district. The First capital of the Tāi-Āhoms. Still in use.

Khum-Tāi  :- 'Khum'-a tank; 'Tāi'-Tāi-Āhoms i.e. a tank excavated by Tāi-Āhoms, in Golāghāt district and also a place in Sibsāgar district. Still in use.

Nām-Chāng  :- Nām-water, low (foot hills); Chāng-a Nāgā village; a village of Nāgās on the foot-hills in Āssām-Nāgāland border, in Sibsāgar district. (Still in use)

Nāzirā  :- Nā-a field; Zi-store,Rā-Slanting, a rice growing field on the bank of river Dikhow in Sibsāgar district.(Still in use).

Rāilung  :- Rāi-Shinning; in Sibsāgar(Still in use).

Rāisā  :- Rāi-Shinning near Charaideo in Sibsāgar district (Still in use)
Rukāng  

Rukāng<Ru-Kāk-āng; Ru-kāk-bamboo;  
āng-compound, enclosure. A compound  
for bamboo, in Sibsāgar district.  
Still in use.

Tāokāk  Tāng-way; kāk-muga; 'muga rearing  
place'; i.e. a way to muga cocoon  
(antharoea Anomoea) rearing place,  
in Sibsāgar district. (name still  
in use).

Tihu  Ti-place, Hu-cattle, a place  
known for cattle, in Nalbāri  
district. (still in use).

Ting-Khāng  Ting-high land; Khāng-wide; a  
wide high land, on the bank of  
Dihing, in Dibrugarh district.  
(Still in use).

Ting-rāi  Ting-high land; rāi-shining,  
twinkling; prominent; a prominent  
high land; in Tinsukiā district,  
once known for elephants. Still  
in use.

Tung-Khāng  Tung-a meadow or a field, Khāng-  
wide; a wide field near Charāideo;  
the living place of Tung-Khangiā  
clan who ruled Assām for about a  
hundred and forty five years, in  
Sibsāgar district. Still in use.
3. **TRANSLITERATED PLACE NAMES** :- A set of River names of Assamese origin have just been transliterated into Tāi-language;

**ASSAMESE**

Jāji
(Jāji- garbage)

Seshā river,
(Seshā-cold).

Shamuk-jān =
Shāmuk - snail;
Jān - streamlet).

**TAI**

Khe-nām-jeng; khe-river;
Nām - water;
jeng-garbage
(Jorhāt district:
Name is not in use)

Khe-nām-jin; Khe-river,
Nām - water,
jin - cold.
(in Dibrugarh
District: not in use).

Khe-Nām-hoi. Khe - river
Nām - water,
hoi - Snail,
(in Sibsāgar district:
not in use).

Sonāi river
(Son-gold).

Khe-nām-Khām; khe - river,
Nām - water,
Khām - gold.
(in Sibsāgar
district: The
river is not in existence).
Tenpānīni \quad Nām-choom ; \quad Nām-river, water
(Tengā-acidic, sour
Pānī-water, river).
(Choom-acidic, sour (in
Tinsukiā district : the
name is still in use).

4. **PLACE NAMES WHERE TAI ELEMENTS ARE PREFIX** : Before the advent of Tāi-Āhoms, Brahmaputra valley was surrounded on all sides by aboriginal tribes of Tibeto-Burman origin except the Khāsis who belong to the Monhmer branch of Austric stock. The remnants of those tribes, particularly the Bodos and the Austrics are still in prevalence in the form of river names. The Tāi-Āhoms prefixed "Khe-nām" and 'Nām' to the Austric and Bodo origin river names.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUSTRIC</th>
<th>BODO</th>
<th>TĀI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dhansiri</td>
<td>Dimā</td>
<td>Nām-ti-mā (Tāi pronounced di as ti) in Golāghāt district. Not in use.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Name still in use)</td>
<td>(not in use)</td>
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<td>(Still in use).</td>
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<td>(still in use)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dibrū</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ti-Phāo in Dibrugarh district. Not in use.</td>
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<td>(still in use)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dichāng</td>
<td></td>
<td>Khe-nām-Chāng, le-chāng ; (still use) (in Sibsāgar District). Not in use.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. **TAI ELEMENTS IN CAPITALS & TOWNS**: During the Tāi-Āhom rule, they established a few capital towns as well as small township in their domain and named it in Assamese language but it always had a Tāi-name which abound in Tāi Chronicles. The Assamese names are now in existence.

**Assamese** | **Tai**
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Abhoipur | Che-khru<che-mākhru; Che-town; Mā-Khru-brinjal;, egg plant (in Sibsāgar district).
Dihing Nagar | Che-tāi-mung>Tāi-mung; i.e. a tāi populated town(in Sibsāgar district).
Gajpur | Che-Chāng, Che-town, Chāng-elephant. (in Sibsāgar district).
Gargaon | Che-hung; Che-town; hung-ramparts A town with ramparts (in Sibsāgar district old capital).
Jorhāt | Sām-Che-hāt; Sām-two, che-town, hāt-market i.e. a twin market. (in Jorhāt district : last capital).
Kaliābar | Tun-rung-dām to denote a kind of Banyan tree. (in Nowgāon district).
Rangpur | Che-mun; Che-town; mun-enjoy,delightful; A place of enjoyment. (in Sibsāgar district : old capital).
Sadiā  Mung-teo-lā, Pong-teo-lā (in Tinsukiā district).
Sonāpur  Che-Khām; Che-town, Khām-gold near Simalguri in Sibsāgar district.

6. PLACE NAMES WITH PREFIX 'CHE' AND 'TI' :- A handful of place names prefix word 'Che' and 'Ti', a particular characteristics are traced and hitherto being used:

Chepon  =  Che-town, pon-cotton, an area known for cotton : Sibsāgar District.
Cherequā  >  Old capital of Āhom. Sibsāgar District
Choroquā  near Demow.
Timon  =  Ti-place, mon-muga silk : Antharoea Assamoea (Cocon).
Tingali bām  =  Ti-place, 'ngā'- sesāme, li-small, little (in Sibsāgar district).
Tipām  =  Ti-place, pām-mounds. (in Dibrugarh district).
Tiphuk  =  Ti-place, phuk-white, sandy, (in Sibsāgar district).
Tirāp  =  Ti-place, rāp-connected (in Tinsukia district).
Tiru  =  Iron melting place, (Teu-ru) teu-to melt iron (in Sibsāgar district).
Tiyok  =  Ti-place, yok-diary products (in Jorhāt district).
7. **PLACE NAMES FROM PARTICULAR EPISODE** : There are some places which have derived their names from particular episode and the names are still in use.

Chāring, : Sukāphā advanced upto ṇāmdāṅ and had a camp there and ordered his nobles to search for a, suitable place for capital. The nobles came across a river on their way which had three thousand gḥāts, (footway to a river for carrying water) and named it Chāmring, a rivulet with three thousand gḥats or footways now known as Chāring in Sibsgār district.

Chongtok > : King Sukānhā and his followers renamed 'Silpāni' as Chongtok - Chong-two, tok-tola, when going upstream of the river Dikhōw (Nām-Chāo), they arrived at Silpāni, a rivulet, and weighing the specific gravity of both the river water they found the rivulet water two tolas heavier than that of Dikhōw and named 'Silpāni' as 'Chongtok' (in Sibsāgar district).

8. **PLACE NAMES : BOTANICAL ORIGIN** : Certain nomenclatures of places were found of Botanical origin. The Tāi names are not in use now.
ASSAMESE  TĀI

Āhontguri : Che-Chop ; after a peepal tree (in Jorhāt district).

Chopāguri : Tūn-māk-rān-khām-a kind of tree.

Jāmuguri : Tūn-mūk-bīn ; after a black berry tree, (in Sibsāgar district).

Kathālbari : Chun-māk-lān ; after Jack fruit orchard, (in Sibsāgar district).


Phutukā-toli : Joi-Khām-dāng ; a kind of wild shrub (in Sibsāgar district).

Silikhā guri : Ti-che-tum-māk-chāk ; the myrobalan; Terminsliā citrinas, in Jorhāt district.

9. RECHRISTENED PLACE NAMES :- The Tāis rechristened some places which already had Assamese synonym ; the Tāi names are not in use now.

ASSAMESE  TĀI

Dibrugarh Ti-phāo, (Dibrugarh district).

Gāhbaru parbat Nong-doi (Jorhāt district)

Jakāi-chuk Khek-chok, (Sibsāgar district)

Jerengā pathār Nām-khrum, (Sibsāgar district).

Mohong Chao-bo-din (Sibsāgar Nāgāland Border)

Mothādang Jong-mung-khām, (Sibsāgar district)

Nowgāon Bān-aon-māo, (Nowgāon District)

Pāni-tolā TĀk-nām, (Tinsukhiā district)

Safrāi Thāmfrāi, (Sibsāgar)
Sonāri Nagar  Che-mung-kām (Sibsāgar district).
The place is not in existence now.

10. **CORRUPTIONS IN PLACE NAMES**: In a group of place names, due to wrong pronunciation, corruptions took place. All the names are still in use.

Bārūk  : Bānruk. (Sibsāgar District).
Bokotā  : Makthā, Blokthā (Sibsāgar district)
Morangi  : Morāngkii, (Golāghāt district).
Nāmrup  : Nāmruk (Tāi-Āhom), Nāmhuk (Tāi-Khāmti) (Dibrugarh district)

Pātkāi  : Pātkāi-seng-kān, Pāt-to cut, or sacrifice, Kāi-fowl, seng-an oath. Kān-taking. Taking an oath after sacrificing a fowl. Old name is Doi-kāu-rong, Doi-hill or mountain, kāu-nine, rong-connected, join. A mountain with nine chains of hills, (Tinsukiā district Nāgāland boundary)

Soḷā  : Soḷā or chōolā, (Nowgāon district).
(Map No.1 shows Tāi river names)
(Map No.2 shows Tāi place names)

11. **CLASSIFICATIONS OF PLACE NAMES**: The place names of Tai origin can be classified or divided broadly into three categories:

11.1 Geographical  : This can be again sub-divided:
11.1.1 Physical viz, Changtok, Nām-Khe, Nām-chao etc. Nām-water, Chāo-clear.
11.1.2 Cultural: Tipam, Tihu, Bahruk, Banruk etc.
11.1.3 Political: Patkai - Seng-khan > Patkai.
11.1.4 Economic: Tiok, Chepon etc. Che-town, Pon-Cotton, derived from the silk cotton tree or Bot, haphylam.
11.1.5 War: "Chup-nam-chao" mouth of river Dikhow where a battle between Tai-Ahom and Kachari took place "Mak-lang-dang" Kaliabar, a place where Tai-Ahoms and Mughals fought for number of times.

11.2 Historical: This may be further sub divided to :-
   a) Early period of Tai-Ahoms,
   b) Medieval
   c) Modern.

In this Medieval and later historical periods, the Tai-Ahoms since Susengpha, (Hindu named Pratap Singh A.D. 1603,) adopted and patronized the Hindu religion and Assamese language. Thence onward the nomenclature of places, rivers etc. were mostly done in Hinduised Assamese form. And they are; Mechagarh, Pukhuri (a Tank), Rupahi Pukhuri, Rohdhol Pukhuri, Lakhimi Pukhuri, Tenga Pukhuri, Langkuri dol (a temple), Thaorol dol, Siva dol, Sibsaigar dol, Raimao pukhuri (Raimao is the mother of king) etc. etc.

11.3 Miscellaneous: This group includes the names outside the periphery of geographical or historical divisions.
12. **CONCLUSION**: In this paper we are trying to highlight some of the important aspects of place-name study which is still a virgin one in which no systematic work has been done so far. An indepth study on the subject will definitely reveal certain facts of national importance on the socio-cultural background of various tribes housed in this part of the country. Further it will also reveal the sound knowledge of the Tais in the naming process in a scientific and systematic manner.

The study of place names, particularly in Assam, which has been melting-pot of various tribes, cultures, languages and religions throughout the ages, has a special relevance to our sense of history as a civilized people living in a colourful and traditionally rich region of India. When one talk of unity in diversity in the national context, it would be well to remember that in Assam in particular and the North-East in general, this adage of unity finds a very colourful and unique application vis-a-vis the rest of the country, for it would be the rare state in India which has such a diverse multi-racial and multicultural tapestry of social and anthropological life, we have in the North-Eastern region. As such, the place names of Assam provide us with a subject of study which can prove to be as absorbing and as interesting to the student of history, as the study of wild life and environment proves to be to the nature lover, or the study of birds is to the ornithologist. And more so, as this is a scholastic area in which the social, cultural, historical and political life of the native people of Assam are intricately bound, as they are bound with the names of the places in which they reside.
In this context, this paper purports to be a minor excursion into this vast extremely absorbing area of study, with the hope that this humble attempt may pave the way for bigger inroads into this virgin field.

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