

Presidential Address

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On behalf of the Association and on my own behalf, I welcome you all to this Conference. I have been laid under great debt by the Executive Committee and members of the North East India History Association by giving me the honour of presiding over the Xth Session of the Association which, I frankly admit, I do not deserve. I accepted this honour in all humility, and I will try to discharge the responsibility, you have put on me. Having been so kind to me, you will ignore, I am sure, my omissions and commissions, and extend your very kind co-operation to make this Conference a grand success.

Friends, today we are meeting at the beautiful new campus of the North Eastern Hill University amidst an idyllic surrounding of pine-clad green hills of Meghalaya, the abode of cloud. It is here in the historic city of Shillong, mainly due to the initiative and drive of Prof. J. B. Bhattacharjee and his colleagues in the History Department and the patronage of this University that the Association was born 10 years ago. Prof. J. B. Bhattacharjee with his distinguished colleagues still continues to be the hub of the Association. The North Eastern Hill University deserves all our praise for its kind and continued patronage without which it would have been rather difficult for the Association to achieve so much success.

The Association has grown in both stature and strength. It has successfully organised its sessions in all the States of North Eastern India. These sessions have gone a long way in creating an academic climate and a sense of awareness and commitment among its members particularly the young scholars for the cause of historical study. During its last nine sessions its members belonging to all the States of North Eastern India contributed more than 300 research papers dealing with oral history, historiography, ethnohistory, polity formation, political history, society, religion, literature, economic history, colonial impact, missionary activities, national movement, labour movement, sub-national movement and constitutional development. These papers together with the learned Presidential Addresses offer a broad view of the region's history and also throw

penetrating insight into some specific historical problems. The Association has also been serving as an effective forum for the exchange of information, thoughts and ideas among its members. It has succeeded in making its existence felt not only in the Universities, colleges and similar other institutions and academic bodies but also in the academic horizon of the country wherever the study of North East India is involved.

The number and quality of research papers on the history of the tribes of this region in any session is very encouraging. It was not long before that the study of tribal history remained confined to reports, memoirs, accounts and monographs prepared by administrators, officials, ethnographers and missionaries who were incidentally all from outside. Happily, students and scholars alike from the tribes themselves are now coming forward to write their own history. The Association's encouragement extended to these scholars is not very insignificant in this respect.

Greater emphasis put on the study of the history of this region has its own reasons. In the past, the history of the region received not sufficient attention of historians of India. This region of India, peopled as it is, by so many diverse ethnic and linguistic groups and sub-groups with their political and social institutions, languages, religions, beliefs and practices, customs and traditions, etc. that the study of one group does not always help to know another group living in close proximity. This situation reduces the region's history to almost local histories. It is in this context that the study of North East India's regional history is of great significance and remains relevant.

This is, however, not to say that the region's history should be studied in isolation and aloof from national history or with a view to creating regional and local chauvinism or to serve sentimental jingoism. Prof. H. L. Gupta in his Presidential Address of the Agartala Session rightly observes, "National history without regional history will be truncated and incomplete and regional history in isolation will be without moorings". At the same time we must also remember Professor. H. K. Barpujari's warning, "Regional study should be complimentary not competitive". Study of regional history in isolation will create a narrow outlook, and at best, will give an incomplete, if not distorted, picture.

Friends, it was 23 years ago I was drawn into the field of study of medieval history of North East India, and Assam in particular, more by compulsion than by choice. This happened in 1966 when I was asked by Prof. H. K. Barpujari, the then professor and Head

of our Department of History, Gauhati University to teach history of Assam covering the period from 1714 to 1858 first introduced at the post-graduate level in the Gauhati University. I was then a novice in the subject, at the same time the number of research works on the subject was limited and that the number of scholars on medieval North East India was fewer still. Very often I had to consult the original sources for information, and this compelled me to get myself acquainted with the languages in which they are written. Now I must frankly admit that all these difficulties have turned into blessings.

It has become a convention on the part of the President to share some of his academic experience with his learned colleagues in a gathering like this. During my long involvement in the studies of medieval Assam, I have been confronted with many problems of different nature, to some of which I have tried to find answers in my own humble way. I may be permitted to place before you only a few of the known problems.

Friends, it is well-known to all of us that the Ahoms entered the Brahmaputra valley from the east in the early part of the thirteenth century and carved out a small kingdom in its easternmost corner after having conquered the Barahis and the Morans, the two small Mongoloid tribes. By the first half of the sixteenth century, this kingdom grew in size and population after the conquest of the kingdom of the Chutiyas on the north-east, that of the Kacharis in the south-west and the Bhuyan chiefs in the west and north-west. During the seventeenth century, the kingdom was further enlarged by the annexation of Kamrup. Since 1682, the western limit of the Ahom kingdom had been the river Manaha on the north and the Nagarbera hills on the south of the Brahmaputra which remained constant till the British occupation of the kingdom.

The Ahoms brought with them their own economy, social and religious institutions, beliefs and customs, language and script which were not the same as those of the people they conquered here. Initially they planted their own systems in the land they conquered. The gradual conquest of new land and population, who were having their own settled systems, necessitated the introduction of a modified system in those areas. It is for this reason, a completely uniform system of administration did not prevail throughout the kingdom. This process ultimately resulted in a form of synthesis to be noticed towards the end of the Ahom rule. The history of medieval Assam is in fact the history of the activities of the Ahoms. Hence the necessity to study in the roots of the Ahoms,

The Identification of Mao Lung

One of the major questions faced by the students of Ahom history is - What was the precise place from where Siu-ka-pha and his followers came to the Brahmaputra valley in the thirteenth century? On the basis of information supplied by Ney Elias in his *Introductory Sketch of the Shans in Upper Burma* published in 1876, and the revised edition of *Assam Buranji* by Kasinath Tamuli Phukan published in 1906, Padmeswar Gogoi says that it was Mong Mit, a Shan State of Upper Burma, from where Siu-Ka-Pha and his followers came to Assam (*The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*, 1968, pp. 252-55). According to S. K. Bhuyan, Siu-Ka-pha came from Mao Lung, a Shan State of Upper Burma in the kingdom of Mong Mao (*Anglo-Assamese Relations*, 1949, p. 2). E. A. Gait doubts about Mao Lung as being the place from where Siu-Ka-Pha came. "There is less certainty as to the precise State from which he (Siu-Ka-Pha) came, but there seems no reason to discredit the statement of the *Buranjis* to the effect that it was Maolung". (*A History of Assam*, 1926, p. 77). This uncertainty of identification perhaps encouraged some writers of modern School books on Assam history to write that it was from Siam, or Thailand that the Ahoms came to Assam, ignoring the historical fact that Siam, officially Thailand (Muang Thai) since 1949, was not founded when Siu-Ka-Pha left his state for Assam.

The Ahom chronicles give the name of the State from where Siu-Ka-Pha came as Mao Lung, Mong Mao, or Mong Mao Lung (*Ahom-Buranji* pp. 4, 42, 43), all applying to the same State. *Mao-Lung* meaning 'Big Mao' refers to the people who are also called *Tai Yai* meaning 'Big Tai' in relation to the *Tai Noi* meaning 'Small Tai', a name by which the Tai of Thailand are known even today to the 'Big Tai'. The English writers called these 'Big Tai' *Mao Shans* as they belong to the Mao branch. They are found in Upper Burma and south-western Yunnan, and were formerly ruled by their own *Chao-Phas* under the Burmese or Chinese Governors, as the case might be, but now abolished in both Burma and China.

Mong Mao means 'State of the Mao,' the exact boundary of which is difficult to define. But it appears to have been confined mainly to the south-western part of Yunnan. The capital of Mong Mao State was called by the same name (H. R. Davies, *Yunnan*, 1909, p. 23). *Mong Mao Lung* means 'State of the Big Mao', i.e. the State of the Mao Shans of the British writers.

From a closer study of the Ahom language chronicles in their originals and also other information presented by Erik Seidenfaden,

H. R. Davies and others, it appears almost certain, that the state of Mao Lung also called Mong Mao from where Siu-Ka-Pha and his followers came, lay in Yunnan. In a map (no.5) showing Bhamo-Mong Mao Frontier Zone, E. R. Leach in his *Political systems of Highland Burma* (1954) places this area between the Nam Mao and the Nam Wan rivers about 50 miles to the east of Bhamo in Burma. Its capital Mong Mao is shown on the right bank of the Nam Mao. It is noteworthy that the script used by the Tai in this part was almost the same with that of the Ahoms till it was modified under the present Chinese government. This area is now included in the Dehong Dai-Singpho Autonomous Prefecture founded on July 14, 1953.

Tai, Thai, Shan and Ahom

The Ahoms are often introduced or indentified as belonging to "the Tai or Shan race", and the names *Tai*, *Thai*, and *Shan* are sometimes used indiscriminately and one is interchanged for the other. Such use makes their denotations blurred, if not confused. The name TAI (Dai in the Chinese Pin Ying or Dubs-Gardner system of romanization) refers to all the groups and subgroups of a people who usually call themselves *Tai* and are or were the speakers of languages classified under the family named *Tai*. They are found in India's north-east, in several regions of Burma, all over Thailand and Laos, northern Vietnam, and the five southern provinces of China, namely, Yunnan, Kwangsi, Kwangtung, Kuechou and Szechuan, and are known under a variety of national, regional and local appellations. They are the Ahoms, Atons, Khamtis, Khamyangs, Phakes and Turungs in India, the Shans, Khuns, Laems, Khamtis of Burma; the Thais, Lao-Thais, Neuas, Yuans in Thailand; Laos, Neuas, Ynans, Lues, Tai Dengs, Tai Dams, Phu-ans, Phu-Tais, seeks in Laos; the Tai-Dams, Tai Khaos, Tai Dengs, Thos, Lues, Nangs, Nungs in Vietnam; and the Chuangs, Puis, Dais, Nungs, Nangs, Lis in Southern China.

Often one and the same group is known by different names to different peoples and languages. In northern Vietnam, a group of Tai people who call themselves *Tai* are known as *Tai Dam* to other neighbouring Tai groups. The Vietnamese name for them is *Tai Den*, the French call them *Tai Noir* and the English *Black Tai*, all are but translations of the name *Tai Dam* meaning (*Tai*=*Tai*, *Dam*=black) *Black Tai* because of their women wear black coloured garments.

THAI is generally used for the Tai people of Thailand and

they pronounce the word *Tai* as *Thai* to distinguish themselves from the other Tais, and also slightly modified, for this purpose, the original spelling of *Tai* (as appears in the famous inscription of king Ram Khamheng of A. D. 1292). Some scholars use this term i.e. *Thai* to include all the Tai groups rather the whole Tai race. But the convention that has been established over the years is to use it to denote the *Thai* (formerly Siamese) of Thailand.

SHAN is the Burmese name for the Tais of Burma which was picked up by the English writers in the nineteenth century from the Burmese mouth. They, however, extended its application to include a section of the Tai in south-western Yunnan near the border of Burma as these Tais were closely related to the Tais of northern Burma, and called them *Chinese Shans*. The Burmese name Shan, which became popular through the writings of Englishmen is, therefore, to be applied to denote the Tai of Burma and not the whole Tai race. It is equally relevant to note that most of the tribes of northern Burma such as the Kachins (also found in Assam and Arunachal and Yunnan), A-ch'angs, Zis, and La-shis call the Tais by the name *Sam*, the Ma-ru call them *Sen*, and the Talains (Mons) name for them is *Sem* (H. R. Davies : *Yunnan*, 1909, p. 377). It is equally relevant to mention that in a recent document prepared on the various names for Tai used by the different peoples, Prof. Cheah Yuan Chong (Xie Yuan Zhang) of the Yunnan Institute of South East Asian Studies, Kunming, has shown that the Kachins in Yunnan and Burma call the Tai by the name *Asam* (A.Sa.m) or *Lasam* (*Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter*, No. 5, June, 1989, p. 6, Australian National University, Canberra). The Morans, whose territory of the Tais under Siu-Ka-Pha occupied, were probably a tribe of the Kachins (H. R. Davies : *Yunnan*, 1909, P. 113, *E. R. Leach : Political Systems of Highland Burma*, 1954, P. 54) and as such they knew the Tai as *Asam* even before their migration to the eastern part of the Brahmaputra Valley during the Pre-13th century period. When the Tai under Siu-Ka-Pha came to their country they naturally might have called the former by the name *Asam* a term later picked up by the Assamese language chroniclers. The Tais of Burma, who are known as *Shans*, however, prefer to be called *Tai*.

The AHOMS also called themselves *Tai* in their language, and this name alone appears in all their works including chronicles written in the Ahom (Tai) language. While the Assamese language chronicles bear at least 14 variants *Aham*, *Khām*, *Asam*, *Ahom*, *Asam*, *Asam*, *Asam*, *Asvam*, *Asyam*, *Acham*, *Acham*, *Acham*, *Asham* and

Ashyam, and the eighteenth century copperplate inscriptions of the Ahom Kings bear at least three forms-*Acham* and *Asam* and *Ahom*, all referring to the Ahoms. The literature of the Ahoms, in Tai as well as Assamese, leave no scope to call the Ahoms *Shan*. It is the English writers who called the Ahoms *Shans*.

Name of Ahom Kings

It is well known to the students of Assam history that it was Siu-Tam-La (A. D. 1648-1663) who was the first Ahom king to have received the formal Sanskrit name (*Hindu nam* of the Assamese chronicles) *Jayadhvasimha* in addition to his formal Ahom name. He is also called *Bhaganiya Raja* in the Assamese language chronicles. Siu-Tam-La received his formal Hindu name *Jayadhvasimha* sometime after his coronation. But from the time of his successor, Siu-Pung-Mong, the Hindu names were given along with the formal Ahom names at their coronations. Following Siu-Tam-La, all the kings barring those four who ruled during the troubled period of $4\frac{1}{2}$ years from April 1775 to November 1779 (from the death of Siu-Klan-Pha *alias* Ramadhvasimha to the accession of Siu-Lik-Pha *alias* Ratnadhvasimha had each two official or formal names, one Ahom, the other Sanskrit. Interestingly, however, the last two Ahom kings are known by their Hindu names only-*Purandarasimha* and *Jogesvarasimha* ; they did not receive Ahom name.

As for the names of 19 kings preceeding Siu--Tam-La two distinct stages are noticed (1) The first 13 kings from Siu-Ka-Pha to Siu-Pim-Pha, with the exception Siu-Dang-Pha (A.D. 1397-1407), all the 12 kings had their Ahom names only. (2) The next 6 kings from Siu-Hum-Mong to Siu-Ting-Pha, each had his Assamese nickname or popular name in the Assamese language *Buranjis* : Siu-Hum-Mong is *Dihingiya Raja*, Siu-Klen (g)Mong is *Garhgaya Raja*, Siu-Kham-Pha *khora Raja*, Siu-Seng-Pha *Burha Raja*, Siu-Ram-Pha *Bhaga Raja*, and Siu-Ting-Pha *Naria Raja*. No doubt some such popular names indicate the kings' association with certain places but such names like 'Khora Raja' 'Burha Raja' and 'Naria Raja' appear to be too rustic. Scholars and others adopted these popular names, and as a result they became more popular often at the cost of the official Ahom names during the British period, and are still being freely used in historical works. Students of history are now more accustomed with the popular names of Ahom kings than their official names.

At first sight, the popular names to the kings appear disorderly and whimsical but at a closer look they clearly indicate the different stages of Hinduisation of the Ahom kings (for that matter the Ahoms as a whole). The absence of Assamese popular names for the first 12 kings only confirms the historical fact that during this period the Ahom kingdom did not include too many Assamese speaking population, and the Morans and the Barahis had their own languages. The episode of Siu-Dang-Pha, who was brought up in a Brahmin family of Habung and hence called *Bamuni Konwar* may be explained as the first major Ahom contact with a big chunk of Assamese speaking population.

The conquest of the Chutiyas, the Kacharis and the Bhuyans during Siu-Hum-Mong's reign (A. D. 1497-1539) resulted not only in the enlargement of the limit of the Ahom kingdom but also in the increase of population. To these newly acquired people, the Ahom language was completely alien and totally unintelligible. In lieu of formal Ahom language names of kings which were too difficult for them to follow, they needed some simple and easily intelligible names. This led to the use of popular Assamese names for the kings and also Assamese titles of the Ahom functionaries. From this time onward appeared the Assamese popular names of Ahom kings. Greater influence of Hinduism resulted in the adoption of formal Hindu name of *Jayadhvasimha* by Siu-Tam-La. This greatly reduced the need of Assamese popular names for the Ahom kings. The process of Hinduization and the adoption of Assamese language by the Ahoms ultimately resulted in the absence of Ahom formal names for the last two kings - Purandarasingha (Purandar Singha) and Jagesvarasingha (Jogeswar Singha).

On names of Tribes and People

As already mentioned, since their advent the Ahoms came into contact with many tribes and people living in and around the Brahmaputra valley and beyond whose names are recorded in the chronicles. While in case of some tribes and people, the names appearing in the Ahom language chronicles fully agree with those in the Assamese language chronicles, in others they differ greatly. For example, the Chutiyas, Barahis, Morans, Kacharis, Hindus, Brahmins, Bangals of the Assamese chronicles are called *Tio-ra*, *Rangajao*, *La-man*, *Ti-ma-sa*, *Kula*, *Pum-na*, *Phang* respectively in the Ahom language chronicles throughout the Ahom rule. The discrepancy in name in the two languages therefore poses certain problems.

The Patkai Nagas whom Siu-Ka-Pha conquered on his way to the Brahmaputra valley are called *Kha* (meaning 'hill people') in the Ahom language chronicles. The Assamese language chronicles, which are of much later date, however, call these hill people *Naga*. Interestingly in the English translation of the Ahom language *Buranji*, *Ahom-Buranji* (1930), Rai Sahib Golap Chandra Barua translates the word *Kha* as *Naga* wherever it appears in the original (p. 45). But from the sixteenth century, the Assamese term *Naga* in its Ahom corrupted form *Na-Ka*, referring to different groups of Nagas, appears in the Ahom chronicles as well. This clearly suggests that the Ahoms did not know the Nagas as *Naga* but knew them as *Kha* in the 13th century. This is why the thirteenth century Ahom chronicles, called the patkai Nagas *Kha*, a name by which 'hill people' are still known to the Tai speakers in Burma, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Southern China. Much later towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Ahom *Na-Ka* was further changed to *Na-ga* and *No-ga* in the Ahom chronicles. All these are also indicative of the fact that the Ahoms were gradually losing their original tongue and becoming Assamese speakers.

While referring to Manipur during the reign of Siu-Hum-Mong (A. D., 1497-1539), the Ahom chroniclers call it *Mong Ke-Se*, meaning 'the Kingdom of *K-Se*' and its King *Chao-Mei-te* meaning the king of the *Mei-Te*' (*Ahom - Buranji*, p.77, original text). *Ke-Se* is the name by which Manipur was known to the Tai, and *Mei-Te* were its people. The appearance of *Ke-Se* and *Mei-Te* in the early sixteenth century Ahom chronicles suggests that the early Ahoms had better knowledge about Manipur. The use of *chao*, a term usually reserved for Tai chiefs and kings, for the King of Manipur is again interesting for, the Ahom chroniclers of the same period applied *khun* meaning 'king', to the Kachari king (*Khun Ti-ma-sa*), the Chutiya King (*Kun Tio-ra*), the Koch king (*Khun-Ko-Sa*) and so on. In the eighteenth century, king Joy Singh of Manipur is called *Khun Me-khe-li*. (p.287) meaning 'King of Mekheli, the latter word is a corruption of Assamese *Magalou* or *Magalu*. While the change from *Ke-Se* to *Me-Khe-li* can be explained in terms of Assamisation of the Ahoms, the change from *chao* to *khun* requires further study.

Friends, I have taken much time on Ahom history. But I have only attempted to show that apparently simple and innocent looking information can be fruitfully utilised for filling in gaps or explaining historical development of events. I have also indicated that our young students in the schools and colleges should be provided

with correct information and impartial views in their history books.

My very distinguished predecessors, Prof. H. K. Barpujari, Prof. H. L. Gupta, Prof. Amalendu Guha and Dr. S. K. Barpujari in their Presidential Addresses, have carefully surveyed the whole range of sources of ancient, medieval and modern periods for the study of the history of North East India. They have also pointed out many important problems and lacunae which required further research and investigations. I only want to emphasise that young researchers in whatever areas or fields they are working should search and research for information the original sources be they archaeological remains, coins, inscriptions, art objects, icons, chronicles, genealogical books, documents-official and un-official, private records, correspondences, foreigners' accounts or even traditions and oral history, with great care, precision and dedication, which, I am sure, are not at all wanting among our students and scholars of the new generation. At the same time, it is also important to present information and results of such investigations in an impartial and unbiased manner, for a historian's mission is nothing but truth and truth alone.

Finally, permit me to express my sincere gratitude to you all for patiently listening to me. Thank you all again.