

Origin of the name 'Abor'/'Adi'

T. Nyori

The Adis are a hill people who constitute a major tribe in the State of Arunachal Pradesh. They are found in the Siang districts i.e., East Siang and West Siang, and the eastern fringe of the Upper Subansiri and the south-western part of the Dibang Valley districts. These areas lie, roughly speaking between the east, Tibet on the west and the Dibang valley on the north and parts of the districts of Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh of Assam in the south. The census of India, 1971 put the number of Adis at 91,496 out of the total population 4,69,511 of Arunachal Pradesh, and they thus formed¹ about 20% of the total population of the State .

The Adis are divided into two broad groups on the basis of some differences, though minor in material culture eg., hairdresses and some social institutions- (i) the Padam-Minyong group and (ii) the Galo group². The first group comprised of number of sub-tribes, viz. the Padams, the Pasis, the Panggis, the Minyongs the Milangs, the Karkos, the Shimongs, the Tangams, the Ashings and the Boris. The second group comprised of the Galos, the Pailibos, the Ramos and the Bokars. The two groups occupy almost two equal halves of the total area of the Adis. Rivers Sido and Siyom, roughly speaking, form the dividing line between the two groups, leaving the first one on the eastern and the second on the western halves. As the Adis of the first group live in the eastern part of the territory, they may be called hereafter the "Eastern Adis" and the second group who live in the western part, the "Western Adis".

For a long time, the Adis had been known as 'Abor' and by that name they were called also

By almost all the writers in the past. But in the recent years the dis themselves have discarded the appellation 'Abor' and have instead wanted that they be called 'Adis'³. The administration in compliance with the popular desire has accepted it. Thus, the Adis of today are the Abor of the past.

Attempts have been made from time to time to establish an ancient identity of the old appellation (Abor). Hutton tried to link the term 'Abor' with 'Abarimon' referred to by Pliny as a great valley inhabited by wildmen and supposed to be in the Himalayas⁴. In drawing such a link Hutton had in his mind, the popular Assamese word 'Abari-manu' or 'Abor (i) manuh' used by the Assamese people to refer to an Abor. Hutton's explanation which presupposes that the Adis had been known to the outside world even in the first century A.D., for that is the acceptable date of Pliny, has been rejected by scholars on the ground of chronology. They say that the Assamese word 'Abari-manu' or 'Abor(i) manuh' being a modern Aryan vernacular word cannot be expected to make its appearance as early as the first century A.D., and therefore 'Aboriman' of Pliny could not be a Greek adaptation from a language which did not then exist⁵.

According to one view which seems to suggest an indigenous origin of it, the word 'Abor' is a shortened form of *Ang-bo-ri*, meaning Ang = 'heart' Bo = 'male man' and Ri = 'water'⁶ or 'river'; thus 'men of heart living near river'. This explanation cannot be accepted for the simple reason that it is difficult for a simple and illiterate people like the Adis (Abors) to coin such an artificial word in very early times. Moreover, the word 'Ri', in the Adi language does not mean 'water' or 'river'. Sachin Roy who has done some anthropological works among the Adis, tries to connect the word 'Abor' with the Adi word *Abo*, thus: "The word may have some connection with *Abo*, the first man, according to the Adi mythology, to whom they trace their origin. According to Roy, the final 'r'

of the word 'Abor' may have been originally 'rr' (i.e. Abor) as found at the end of the names of some other tribes e.g. Aorr, Simirr etc., all meaning 'man'⁸. This theory too is not convincing for the fact that in the Adi mythology, it is not Abo or Abor but Abotani or Tani or Doni who is regarded as the ancestor of the Adis. (In the Adi language, Abo= 'father', Tani or Doni is considered the name of that common father, thus Abotani). Moreover, in the Adi vocabulary the term Abo (not Abor) literally means 'father' and not first man as Roy supposes.

The word 'Abor' is generally believed to be of Assamese origin, and is a compound of two Assamese words A and Bori. A, native particle means 'not', while 'Bori' means 'submitted' or 'subjected' and together they form 'Abori' or 'Abori' which means 'one who does not submit' or 'one who does not owe any allegiance to anybody' and is thus an equivalent to 'independent'. The coining of such word occurred, on the part of the people of the plains of Assam due to the fact that they 'the plains people of Assam) could not dictate their obstinacy used the name 'Abor' for them'. The long history of the people vis a vis their neighbours in Assam actually goes to justify such an explanation for the origin of the term 'Abor'. Incidentally, the hilly regions where the hill tribes lived were, in many cases, inaccessible or not retain their insubordinate attitude; and consequently the term (Abor) used to imply 'inaccessible' also in addition to 'independent'.

Thus the *Tungkhungia Buranji* (an Assamese chronicle of the late eighteenth century) applies the term 'Abor' even to the independent Naga tribes of the interior of the Nagahills, when it says that in Saka 1614 (1692-93 AD) the Ahom king Gadadhar Singha despatched one Tencheng Phukan to suppress the Nagas living near the Dayang. The Nagas approached the officer and begged him saying, "for ages we have been eating crumbs thrown off from the dis-

hes of the king. We have not committed this misdeed. The Abors have done it'. The word 'Abor' in the above passage refers not to the Adis, but to Nagas of the interior Naga hills.

In this context the explanation of the terms 'Abor' and 'Bori' as given by Captain T. Brodie may be relevantly quoted. "The whole of the Nagas", says Brodie, "May be classified under the heads of Abors of independent tribes and Boris or dependent; the former generally inhabit the hills of the interior and few of them only come down to the plains. The latter occupy the hills immediately bordering the plains"². It seems, in the same way the hill tribes of the northern hills and foothills also have been classified into two - (i) the dependent or submissive groups called the 'Miris' and (ii) the independent or insubordinate groups known as the 'Abors'. An explanation for such classification may be found when S.K. Bhuyan writes, "The Abors and the Miris represent the later and the earlier migration of the same tribe. The Abors as the last comers have retained their pristine ferocity, while the Miris have become docile and peaceful, having lived long in the plains and the lower hills"³.

Thus, there are records showing the appellation 'Abor' was not always restricted to the people of our study, that had wide significance and that it was applied at times indefinitely to all the hill tribes on both sides of the valley of Assam, more particularly the 'insubordinate' and 'interior' ones among them. Although originally, the tribes of the interior hills on both sides of that valley were called Abors, such as Abor Nagas, Abor Miris, Abor Daflas etc. but in course of time, more particularly during the British rule when constant disturbances occurred in their borders of the northern hills, only, the tribes of these hills, who lived between the Subansiri and Dibang rivers, were popularly known as the 'Abors'¹⁴.

From the above discussion it appears that originally 'Abor' is an Assamese word meaning 'non-submissive', 'insubordinate', 'independent' or 'inaccessible for victory'. But during the British period some writers have used the term 'Abor' in the abusive sense of 'barbarians' 'rude' 'unruly' 'savage' etc., besides 'disobedient'. Such derogatory sense borne by the term is one of the reasons why the Adis of today do not like to call themselves as 'Abor'. However, the main reason of their disliking of the term 'Abor' is that they never call themselves by that term, but always called themselves and have preferred to be called as 'Adi' which, in their own language, literally means 'hill' and thus in its extended and final sense 'the people living¹⁵ in the hills' or briefly 'hillman' or 'highlander'. Accordingly, the Adis have discarded the old term 'Abor' in favour of 'Adi' and have insisted that they be called by this name and not by the term coined for them by others.

Notes & References

1. Census Report, 1971, Series-24, Arunachal Pradesh (district census hand-book, Siang District) p. 19.
2. The people of the Galo(proper) sub-tribe of the Adis call themselves as Galos not as Galongs or Gallongs. So hitherto they will be called as Galos and their group will also be known as the Galo Group.
3. As some writers, the people of this tribe cannot be termed separately as the Adis and the Galongs. They all call themselves as the Adis. They are the Padam Adis, Minyong Adis, Galo Adis and so on. Earlier writers also (except Dunbar) termed them commonly as the Abors. Their groups were called as the Bar Abors or Padam Abors, Galong Abors, Minyong Abors, Pasi Abors and so on.

4. J.H. hutton, **Caste in India**, London 1946. p.182.
5. Sachin Roy, **Aspects of Padam-Minyong Culture**, Shillong, (1960), 1966,p.1.
6. U. Chamka's (an administrative officer of NEFA) written communication as referred to by S. Roy, **op.cit.** p.4.
7. **Ibid**, p.5.
8. **Ibid.**
9. This explanation is given in the Assam Census Report, 1981, as quoted by Alexander mackenzie in the **North-East Frontier of India**, (1884),1979, earlier published in 1884 under title **History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal**, (Appendix-J)p.544.
10. Hema Chandra Barua, **Hem Kosha**, (1900,1945 1955), 1965, pp.96-97.
11. S.K.Bhuyan (ed), **Tungkhungia Buranji**, Gauhati, 1968, p. 28.The original passage in Assamese runs thus, "ami sakalodine devar chuapator khowa bandi; ami e katha kara nai.aborehe karichhe".
12. Captain T. Brodie, "Selection of papers regarding the hill Tribes between Assam and Burmah and on the Upper Brahmaputra",1973, p.286, as quoted by S. Roy, **op.cit.**,p.2.
13. S.K. Bhuyan, **Anglo-Assamese Relations**, 1771-1826,(1949),1974,pp38-39.
14. E.T.Dalton, **Tribal History of Eastern India**, Calcutta, (1872), New Delhi 1978, p. 22.
15. Among the Adis themselves, the people of the lower region usually call the people of the upper region or highland as the Adis i.e., the hilanders. .Thus, the Pasis of the highland or the upper region are called the Adi Pasis.