

Misnomer Phase of the Nyishi Nomenclature : A Historical Analysis

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The Nyishi is one of the principal aborigine tribes of North East India, inhabiting in East Kameng, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, Kurung Kumey, and Upper Subansiri districts of Arunachal Pradesh and some parts of Lakhimpur and Sonitpur districts of Assam. The Tribe known for its prowess and sturdy build, independence loving by nature and temperament, simple, but industrious and straightforward, and having an enormous sense of commitment towards the community. The Nyishi has thus earned for itself a noteworthy place in the annals of the tribes of the Indian sub-continent but with a misnomer in the nomenclature.

Over the past several decades a great deal has been written about the Nyishi. Most of these researchers were less involved in the regional ethnohistory but more interested in addressing the question of the emergence of the Tribe over the centuries in the history of North East India in particular and India in general. More recently, some articles appeared in the *Resarun*¹ and *NEIHA Proceedings*² on the origin of the word, Nyishi. None of these writing on the origin of the Nyishi has yet attempted an in-depth examination of the origin of the nomenclature based on a vigorous analysis of the empirical historical data and available traditions amongst the people. However, these writings are simply blanket portrayal of repetition of already recorded (sometimes inaccurately) document and inaccurate nomenclature on the Nyishi which was usually obtained from the third hand information or even personal travel and passing observations. As such, the ethnohistory of the Nyishi in North East India prior to the Ahom's expansion poses serious obstacles to scholarly understanding. The available sources are the chronicles which are very difficult for contemporary native researcher to approach. The first and foremost problem is the complexity of the discourses itself that *Ahom Court Chroniclers* recorded. Most of the vital information on the Nyishi that we are confronted with has virtually no contextuality. In many cases, not a shred of documentary evidence is available to help us to cross-examine the authenticity of their writings, which we can only vaguely situate in time and period. In addition while attempts were made

to understand the Tribe the nomenclature of Dafla had been used as an epithet to the Nyishi. However, no where in the Nyishi culture, tradition, polity or society there appears to have been a word like Dafla before the Ahom occupation of modern Assam. An erroneous etymological implication on the Nyishi has been enormous and thus, a close and critical examination is needed to understand the misnomer phase of the Nyishi nomenclature vis-à-vis origin of Dafla word.

The dominant views at the beginning of the century was expressed by the *Ahom Court Chronicles* which argues, that the basic reason why Nyishi has no written record is because it never provided any comfort to an Ahom administration. The legacy left behind by the Ahom Chronicles was safely inherited by the British administration after their annexation of the Brahmaputra Valley and adjoining hills tribes. A myth exists amongst the Nyishis about how they came to lose their script and the people in the plains retained theirs and thus became literate and the Nyishis remained illiterate. As narrated by some elders of the tribe it is believed that in most ancient past, all wisdom and knowledge was written on the piece of animal skin and bestowed to both the Nyishi and the *Nyepak* (Plains) people. The Nyishi could not resist the pangs of hunger; their piece of skin was cooked and eaten up. It is because of this, that the Nyishi has been always illiterate and the plains people were learned. Among the many complexities that needs scrutiny the most obvious is the historicity of the word Dafla. What is of interest here is the crucial, if little appreciated fact that increasingly throughout the last century, the Western scholars and Indian researchers have used the term invariably based on the records of Ahom. But it is necessary to perceive and reconstruct the history of the Nyishi systematically and such study might show that the use of the term Dafla has been a gross misnomer

The first thing to remember is that the word 'NYISHI' is a generic term. It is derived from two words; 'Nyi' or 'Nyia' and 'Shing' or 'Ashing'. 'Nyi' means 'Human descendant of *Aath Nyia*', while 'Shing' or 'Ashing' means 'Being' or 'higher region or highlands'. Accordingly, the word Nyishi stands for 'Human Being' or 'people living at highland regions'. The tradition current amongst the people is that the Nyishi name for the northern region or its people are known as 'Nyeme' and their plains neighbours are called 'Nyepak'. Hence, the Nyishi also maintained that they inhabit between the *Nyeme* and the *Nyepak*. In the past, they were little known by this racial nomenclature. They were known as Chungi or Dafla in *Ahom* and *Assam Buranji*.³ Subsequently, the

British used these words to dub the Tribe as 'unruly hills men', dwelling in the 'unadministered frontiers' and ultimately legitimized them to be the names for the new subjugated subjects by the imperial power of British India. Henceforth, colonial administrators, military officials, explorers and ethnographers started using various designations like, Duphlas, Dafla, Dumphilas, Bangni, Ni-sing, Nisu, Western and Eastern Dumphilas, Tagin Duphlas, Yano Daflas, so on and so forth. Such an ambiguous and variegated assortment of terms applied to the Tribe is very well demonstrated in the Report of G.W. Dun, when he says:

“We have been in the inhabit of using the names of Pacham Daphla, Tagin Daphla, and Abor Daphla, but the best authority agree that there is little or no difference between the people so called.”⁴

However, the tribe always call themselves 'Nyishi'. They are Nyishi not because they live in the hills or highlands, but are Nyishi, and called themselves ever since they descended from their great mythical ancestor *Aabh Tanyi*, the father of *Aath Nyia*. In this respect Dun wrote; “The Daphla [*Nyishi*] call themselves Nyising, and assert that they are descended from Nyia, the Son of Abotani.”⁵ It is in the fitness of things that we may put forward some arguments on the contemporary written documents under which various names came to be applied to Nyishi by their neighbours, particularly in the Ahom Chronicles, British records, and later on the Indian officials. The origin of the word Dafla or Dafala is a mystery and inexplicable to the Nyishi. Besides, this nomenclature does not find any place[reference] in the traditions, legends and myths of the Nyishi hitherto. Relating to origin of term Dafla, N.L.Bor remarked; “The origin of this name [Dafla] is shrouded in mystery.”⁶ The irony is that neither the tribe understood the meaning of the nomenclature nor did they accept the same so far. As regards, the meaning and origin of Dafla word, the *Report on the Census of Assam, 1881*, reported;

“The origin and meaning of the name Daphla are not known. As pronounced in Lakhimpur, it would be written Dumphila. They call themselves Niso or Nising.”⁷

It appears from the above discussion that the British officials were highly perplexed and without any clear understanding of the meaning of the word Dafla, but simply followed whatever, the interpreter conveyed to them. This is clearly discernable from the confused and chaotic names given to the Nyishi. As regards the earliest reference to the Dafla, it is

found in *Deodhai Buranji* and *Purani Assam Buranji*. In both these *Buranjis*, it is mentioned that in the month of *Phalguna* [March] of 1535 *Saka*, the King ordered Laku Barpatra and Bharali Gohain to lead an expedition against the Western Nyishi.⁸ In the *Tungkhungia Buranji*, the Nyishi is referred to as 'Chungi'.⁹ It is important to mention here that there is no exact meaning of the term Dafla found in any authoritative dictionaries and works of Assamese language. An Assamese Dictionary *Chandrakanta Abhidhan* explains the meaning of the Dafla word as; "Only north of Assam between Bhutan hills and Assam plains there are hills tribe called dafla."¹⁰ According to another Assamese Dictionary, the *Hemkosh*, the meaning of the Dafla word is; "A hill tribe of Assam."¹¹ The *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines the meaning of the Dafla in this way;

"Dafla also called Bangni, tribal people of eastern Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh [formerly NEFA], a mountainous State in North Eastern India, they speak a Tibeto-Burman language of the Sino-Tibetan family."¹²

The name Dafla is certainly an anglicised form of spelling of Assamese term 'Dafala'. This view is undoubtedly reflected in the writing of Waddell;

"The name Dafla appears to be an Assamese epithet, though its meaning is not apparent. The eastern members of the tribe seem to call themselves Ni-Sing."¹³

We also find that in the Assamese language, there is a word called *dafali*. This word has been explained in *Hemkosh Dictionary* as "A woman of the Dafla tribe, short but strong and stout."¹⁴ Therefore, S. Chaliha compares the word *dafali* with 'good looking, well built and sturdy woman', and swift to draw inference that the word Dafla stood for a good looking, handsome, sturdy and robust built.¹⁵ However, in the Assamese language, no word specifically explains the meaning of the term Dafla, and so the hazy assumption is that the Dafla is a corrupt form of the Assamese word *dafali* which is largely used in Upper Assam. It is thus, difficult to agree with the existing meaning which equates Dafla with the Nyishi as the original tribal meaning.

Therefore, in view of the foregoing accounts, the 'good looking and handsome' theory of the word Dafla seems to be unconvincing and unsubstantiated. The name 'NYISHI' however has a deep-rooted meaning,

as is evident from the available historical information handed down from generation to generation. In this connection, W. Robinson, who had first reported on the Nyishi of the north bank of the Brahmaputra Valley stated thus;

“Subonsiri debouches into the plains, is occupied by a tribe of mountaineers, usually known... under the appellation of the Daphlas [Nyishi]. This term, whatever may be its origin, is not recognized by the people to whom it is applied, except in their intercourse with the inhabitants of the plains.”¹⁶

Several Western anthropologists and Indologists have produced a good deal of ethnographical writings and have sought to provide a sound explanation of the word, Dafla. The most well-known of this group is C.V.F. Haimendorf who, after a long period of research on the tribe has come out with impressive works like, *Ethnographic Notes on the Tribes of the Subansiri Region and Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh*, and *Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh: Anthropological Research in North-East India*. In these works, Haimendorf has made the modest attempt to elucidate the meaning of the word Dafla and he writes that; “The Assamese term Dafla... seems to have originally meant ‘wild man’ or ‘barbaric’, but it has for a long time been applied to the tribes.”¹⁷ It would be worthwhile to point out here that we do not find any meaning in Assamese language of the word Dafla to mean, ‘wild man’ or ‘barbaric’ so far. Hence, the explanation of meaning of the name Dafla with ‘wild man’ or ‘barbaric’ appears to be result of Haimendorf’s preconceived and unsubstantiated notion which seems to be a curious assumption, unsubstantiated by the available written sources and traditional evidence regarding the meaning of Dafla. Therefore this view is neither plausible nor very acceptable.

It has been stated that there is a glaring absence in the traditions and legends of the tribe about the term. This name Dafla was definitely given to the Nyishi after they migrated from China via Tibet and settled in the Nyishi Hills. On the other hand, some of the Nyishi clans had descended to foothills from the upper reaches and settled along the plains of the major river mouths in the modern day Assam. It is presumed, the word Dafla was probably given to them during their progressive contact with the plains people. In this regards, there are some theories advanced by a few scholars, relating to origin of the word Dafla. It is said, during the time of meets, the plains people asked the Nyishi, what is your name?

So, the person responded, assuming asking his residential location and quickly replied; *te-dofalak* meaning 'to be up there my residence' [place]. Taking cue of an *onomatopoeic sound*, the Nyishi was identified with the name *dofalak* which later on got corrupted into Dafala, and during the British period further altered to an anglicised phonetic spelling form Dafla. Other theory is that the Dafla word as coined by the plains people after seeing the recurrent scenes of slaying the adjoining villagers into two parts by the Nyishi. This cutting of two halves is called *doi phal* in Assamese language. It is said that this word *doi phal* was later on corrupted into the term Dafala and thus, the Nyishi was known as Dafla. But these theories do not appear to be corroborated by any other available sources. Yet there is another plausible hypothesis regarding the word Dafla. We are of the opinion that the word Dafla might have been derived from the Bodo [Boro] term *dafa* which means 'group, team, batch or the entire group'.¹⁸

It is in fact, a historical finding that before the advent of the Ahoms in 1228 A.D., the Bodo were one of the dominant races in Assam¹⁹, and as such, they would seem to have left traces of their domination in the names of some of the physical features and tribes of the area. The Ahoms found the Brahmaputra Valley peopled by small settlements of the Borahis, the Morans and the Bodo race, whom they had no difficulty in subduing. There was, however, a Chutia kingdom of considerable power in the background which had absorbed the ancient Pal dynasty of Sadiya and in so doing had adopted the Hindu religion. The Chutia dynasty at that time ruled at Sadiya and Rangpur in the Sibsagar district did not extend their domination towards the north bank of the Brahmaputra.²⁰ The Bodo consequently had room in which to develop themselves, for a considerable time inhabited at Gogamukh division before they finally collided with the Ahoms and subsequently was driven to the Kopili and Dhansiri Valleys.²¹ Therefore, the Bodo were settled and dominated at present day Gogamukh lying between Dhemaji and North Lakhimpur district.²² The Bodo name of diverse rivers and places proceeded with prefix; *Di, Ti* or *Doi*, which means water or river²³ and *Dikrang, Dihing, Dihong, Dibong, Dimu, Dibru, Digaru*, etc., are some of the enduring examples.²⁴ Accordingly, *Doimukhang* and *Dikhrang* words corrupted into *Doimukh* and *Dikrang*, which is an obvious Bodo name, means, the mouth of river and river itself. Therefore, on the basis of above forms of first syllable finding on the place and river names, it can be said with some certainty that there are noticeable degree of common Bodo elements

present particularly at foothills areas for naming places; and even a tribe. As a result, we cannot rule out the possibility on the ground that the name Dafla might have been derived from the Bodo word *dafa*; and subsequently, in course of time to Dafla which we find even in *Ahoms Buranjis*.

While considering these literary sources some comment must be made on the way in which they are to be handled and used. It must be kept in mind that many contemporary sources on the Nyishi have either been destroyed in the course of time or are yet to be found. There are large gaps, which can only be filled either by careful scholarship or by new discoveries. With regards to the earlier sources, it must be remembered that the authors were foreign to the tribe, and therefore, looked on the Nyishi and its customs, and traditions with alien eyes. The undertone of perplexity and awe that crept into their writings cannot be taken too seriously. Because of the alien character of the material information they were handling, it is possible that they might at times have mixed up the physical and cultural aspects of the Nyishi. Another acute problem common to all alien scholars dealing with the Nyishi is that of the translation of specialized terms. The meaning of words varies according to the context, and the connotation of words changes from age to age and areas to areas. For instance, there is no precise translation in English for the word *Aath Nyia* or *Aabh Tanyi* and thus, there is every likelihood of wrong interpretation.

It is to be noted that in view of the inadequate information, lack of hard materials, and with vague data, nothing can be said with certainty about the origin of the word Dafla, whether actually derived from the Bodo word *dafa* or the Assamese term *doi phal* or *dafali*; and the Nyishi word *te-dofalak*. However, for our purpose of inquiry as to, at what point of time in the history of the Nyishi, the name Dafla was labelled on the tribe, it is indeed, 'a million dollar question'. It is apparent; we must accept that more detail and intense study on the subject is still called for, although the task is, admittedly, an inspiring and challenging one.

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