

Migration from Myanmar to the Brahmaputra Valley : Revisiting Political scenario of Medieval Assam

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Abstract

Assam, located in the eastern region of India witnessed a long history migration. A state most commonly known for the migration politics caused from Bangladesh had witnessed a continuous phrases of migration from China and Myanmar also. A major section of the ethnic groups living in Assam comes under the fold of Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. A continuous migration process was going in Assam from the Myanmar region which severely influenced the political courses of Assam since 12th century. The Chutias, one of the ancient tribes in Assam also said to have their origin in either southern part of China or near the Sino-Myanmar border. The Ahoms, who made an unparallel record in the history of medieval India by successfully ruled for 600 years continuously was coming from South East Asia region. Again in the 18th century the Khamtis and the Singphos got settlement in the eastern frontier of upper Assam and gradually increased their political dominance. In this paper an attempt has been made to trace the transborder migration to Assam specially from Myanmar in the medieval times.

Keywords: Assam, Burma, communication, Frontier, Mongoloid, Myanmar, outsiders, tribe

Introduction

Assam, located in the eastern region of India witnessed a long history migration. A state most commonly known for the migration politics caused from Bangladesh had witnessed a continuous phrases of migration from China and Myanmar also. While the migration from Bangladesh is a major area of concern in the socio political field of modern Assam, the scenario of medieval Assam was quite opposite to that. During the early medieval times in

the context of Assam, the fertile region became the destination for many migratory ethno-linguistic groups from Myanmar. The cross-border migration between Assam, China and Myanmar is not a recent phenomenon, but had been in place for over 10-12 centuries. A major section of the ethnic groups living in Assam comes under the fold of Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. A continuous migration process was going in Assam from the Myanmar region which severely influenced the political courses of Assam since 12th century. The Chutias, one of the ancient tribes in Assam also said to have their origin in either southern part of China or near the Sino-Myanmar border. The Ahoms, who made an unparalleled record in the history of medieval India by successfully ruled for 600 years continuously was coming from South East Asia region. Again in the 18th century the Khamtis and the Singphos got settlement in the eastern frontier of upper Assam and gradually increased their political dominance. In this paper an attempt has been made to trace the transborder migration to Assam specially from Myanmar in the medieval times.

In this paper an attempt has been made to trace the linkage of Assam (specially the Brahmaputra valley or Upper Assam)with Myanmar during the medieval times. It tries to understand the Issue of identity and outsider -insider dichotomy in context of the medieval Assam's socio-political history. Again it highlights the impact of migration in the political history of medieval Assam . This paper tries to understand how transborder movements of several ethnic groups changed the courses of political economy of Assam till 20th century in spite of the seclusive approach of the rulers of Assam .

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this paper is to make a critical study on the impact of migration from Myanmar upon the demography and political economy of Assam. It also tries to examine the identity of the terms like 'outsiders' and insiders in the context of socio-political history of Medieval Assam.

METHODOLOGY

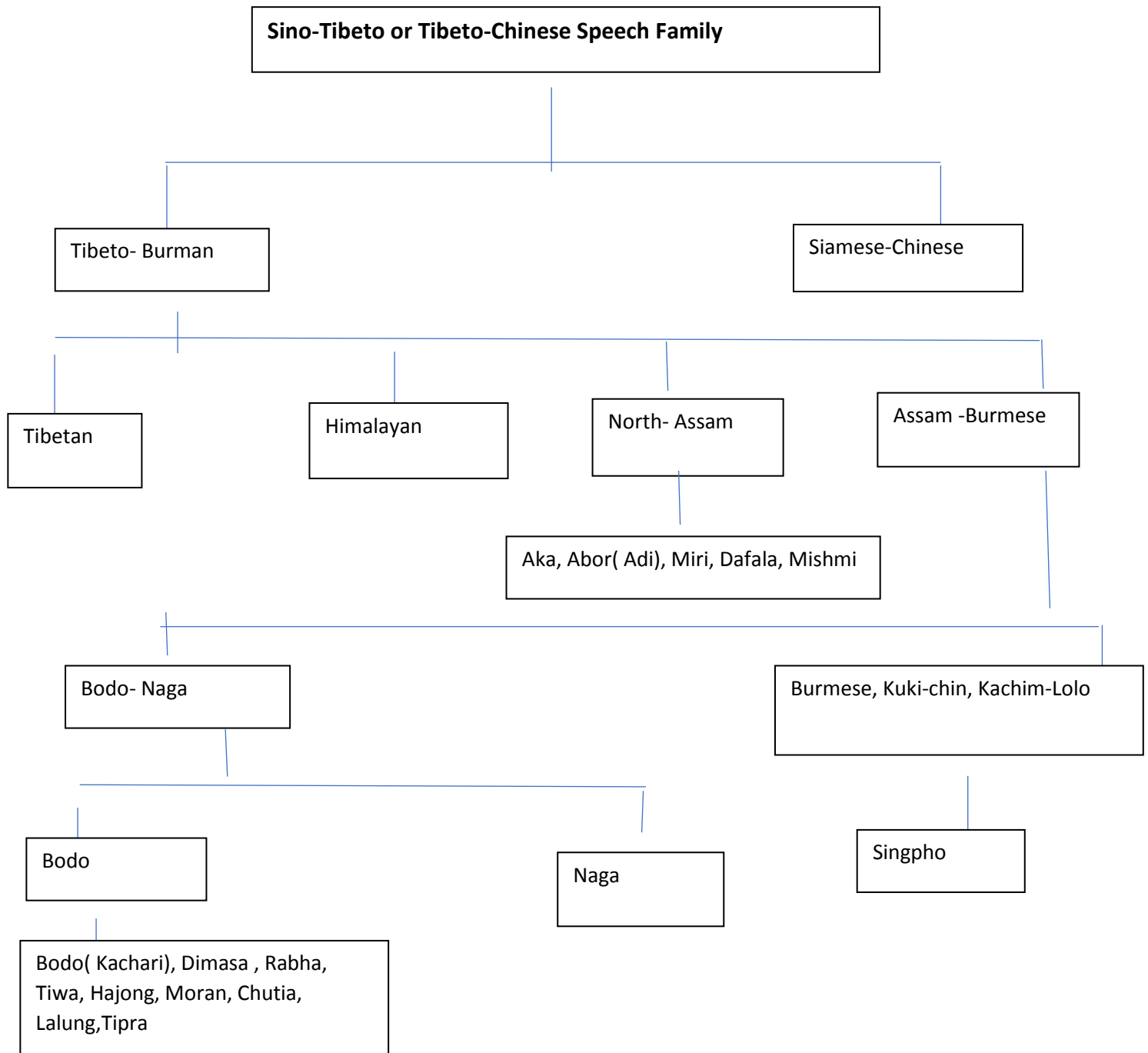
The approach of this research is historical and exploratory in nature. Both conventional and analytical methods of research are followed to achieve the objective. For the history of early medieval and medieval era , both the primary and secondary sources like edited books, existing medieval chronicles, books, journals etc. are taken into consideration.

Review of Literature

Books like ‘A Comprehensive history of Assam’ by S.L.Baruah, ‘Asam Buranji’ by D.Nath helps in understanding the general socio-political history of Assam during the medieval times. Almost all the books like Mahavir Singh’s edited book, ‘Home Away from Home: Inland Movement of People in India’(2017) , Hamlet Bareh’s edited work ‘Encyclopedia of North-East India, Volume 1’, Bhagat Oinam and Dhiren A. Sadokpam’s major compilation titled ‘Northeast India: A Reader’(2018) not only highlights the geo political history of the North Eastern regions but also discusses the socio cultural diversity of the region. Again books on Sadiya like ‘Sadiyar Buranji’ by Bhabananda Buragohain and ‘Sadiyar Barnamoi Buranji’ by Shree Kumar Dahutia deals with the trade and communications developed in the Sadiya region with the neighbouring countries like China, Burma and Tibet. While ‘Ahomor Din’ by Hiteswar barbarua and Harakanta Sadaramin’s ‘Assam Buranji’ tries to highlight the issue of Myanmar nexus in medieval history of Assam. The Southern Silk Route: Historical Links and Contemporary Convergences highlights the Tai Ahom identity crisis issue in the context of trans border migration from Myanmar.

Discussion

Since ancient times, people of Assam had close relation with the regions like China, Bhutan, Tibet or Burma (present Myanmar). This relation can be categorised in terms of anthropology, demography, trade and commerce or military. For the context of linguistic culture, the aboriginal or indigenous tribes of Assam was mostly linked with the Sino - Tibetan Language family. Renown linguists like Robert Shaffer, Sunit Kumar Chatterjee, Dr. Greerson etc, have divided the Sino-Tibetan family like this: The table mentioned below reflected that till 19th century the major group of population in Assam was either belonged to the greater Bodo group or Tai group and both the groups are the branches of great Sino-Tibeto or Tibeto-Chinese Speech Family. The Mongoloid race stock played a vital role in forming the socio-cultural structure in Assam for which the people of Assam as well as the ruling class had shown more inclination towards the eastern direction i.e. to Myanmar, Thailand, China rather than to the rest of India. The political and diplomatic relations of the medieval rulers of Assam made the South Asian proneness more crystal clear.



Changing political scenario in Upper Assam: Migration from Myanmar

The history of Medieval Assam is simply the history of migration. The eastward migration through the present Indo-Burma border in medieval times played a vital role which not only changed the demographic pattern but also the courses of socio political history of Assam. For example till 13th century, Upper Assam was mostly dominated by the Morans, Borahis, Chutias, Mottoks, Morans, Kacharis and the Bodos. At that time the southern part of Lakhimpur district and the south eastern part of Sibsagar district was occupied by the tribes

of Morans and Borahis. Sukhapas contemporary ruler of Borahis and Morans were Thakumtha and Badousa respectively.¹ All were the indigenous tribes of Assam who were belonged to the greater Bodo ethnic group. To certain limit it was the time when the state formation process was in progress from the status of tribal chiefdom and among them the Chutias were the most politically well organised tribe with a distinctive political status over the others. But taking advantage of the political chaos due to the internal conflicts in the Chutia state in the 12th century, the ruler of Mogaung, named Cham Lung Pha led expedition to Manipur and Upper Assam. On the directions of Chao Kam Pha, ruler of Mao Shan kingdom, Cham Lung Pha attacked the Chutia territory of Lekarai. Even the story of his expedition to Sadiya and Manipur was recorded in the history of Manipur.² Though the Chutia brothers fought bravely but they could resist the enemies.³ According to a Mao Shan Chronicle, named Hsen-Wi, the Chutia royal family and officers accepted the subjugation of Chau Lung Pha but Koshi (successor of king Lekarai) killed the representative of Mau Shan king by giving poison and began to run administration freely. Within the gap of six months, the ruler of Mau Shan sent army under the leadership of chau ka pha for which Koshi, the Chutia king had to flee towards the neighbouring Kachari state. Though Chau Ka Pha left Sadiya without making any administrative or political arrangements as he could not penetrate into the territory of Ratnadhaj Pala for the latter's powerful existence but clearly exposed the political vacuum in the eastern frontier of Assam and made the path open for the Ahoms to enter Assam.

Generally it is said that the medieval history of Assam actually had begun from the advent of the Ahoms in the 13th century. Ahoms were the outgrowth of the Shan or Tai branch of South East Asia. They at first migrated to China from that place they came to Mungrimungram in Yunan. One particular group of Tai came to Assam and their original homeland was Kieng Sen Mao-Lung⁴ and the capital of the state was Mong Mao-Lung.⁵ After that they incrementally expanded their territory and established their states in the whole Hukong Valley.⁶ Sukhapha left his homeland Maulung, in A.D. 1215 with few followers. After wandering about the territory between the Irrawaddy and Patkai range for some years, they passed across the Patkai range in the year 1228 A.D and dominated the war-like tribes who inhabited the whole region from the Hukong valley to the Patkai range. Sukhapha easily overcame the tribal chiefs of upper Assam except the Chutias and laid the foundation of Ahom state which continuously ruled for 590 years, an unparallel feat in the history of Medieval India. Like the Ahoms, the Khamti, Khamyang, Aiton, Phake and Turung (all are

belong to greater Tai ethnic group) also migrated to Assam in the medieval times. When Chu ka pha left his original place and began his journey from Mounmit to Assam, his maternal brother king Sukhyanfa sent several groups to bring news about Su Ka Pha but they failed. Then the king formed a group of people from 9 clans and selected 9 leaders to lead the campaign. These people came but couldn't get the exact news of Sukapha. After 7 years of investigation when the group met Sukapha, he clearly expressed his unwillingness to return to his homeland. Su Ka Pha requested the people to settle in Assam Myanmar Border, so that they could act as a mediator. Then they got settled at Nong Kheo Nang Khek Jang of Changlang district near Indo Myanmar border. Nong Kheo means Lake of blue water which is popularly known as lake of no returns. The Tai Khamyang people migrated along with the Ahoms but they settled near for almost 500 years. At Khamyang or Nong Kheo, the Khamyang tribe lived for almost 500 years. In 1780, they migrated to Namsung (Tengapani) and Maung teula (Sadiya).

Assam's most troublesome neighbors on the Sadiya Frontier were however the Singphos, identical in race with the Kakus or Kakhyens of Burma. They are estimated to have a fighting strength of 10000 men.⁷ As per their oral traditions, the Singphos unable to resist the superior might of the Burmese, left their original home, crossed the Patkai ranges of hills on Indo-Burmese border and entered Assam in late 18th century A.D.⁸ After the coming of the Khamtis, the Singpho tribe slowly and silently penetrated in to the Brahmaputra valley through the frontier routes. Singphos bounded on the North by the Lohit River, on the East by the Langtan Mountains, which separate them from the Bor-Khamtis and on the West, by a line drawn south from Sadiya. The Tungkhungia Buranji refers in certain terms to their migration to Assam sometimes in 1793 A.D.⁹ During the reign of Gaurinath Singha, they drove out their arch rival Khamtis from Tengapani (East of Sadiya tract) and settled there.

The Khamtis, migrated from the bank of the Irrawaddy River in Upper Myanmar or Bar Khamti country, called Khamti-Long by the Burmese to Sadiya between 1780 to 1794.¹⁰ Approximately 200 people under the leadership of the Khamti Chief Chao Wilung Kingkham entered the Na Dihing¹¹ area and Swargado Rajeswar Singha settled them at first in Tengapani region of present Arunachal Pradesh. However, the Shingpho inroads compelled them to migrate from Tengapani to Sadiya region. Probably the common Tai Linkage helped the Khamtis to get frontier areas for settlement. From that time, Chao Wilung Kingkham was known as Bura Raja and his nephew was known as Deka Raja.¹² After getting warm response

from the Ahom rulers, another four hundred people entered Sadiya-Tengapani, Dirak-Dihing region during the last decades of the 19th century.¹³ Taking the advantage of the outbreak of the civil war in upper Assam due to the Moamaria Rebellion, the Khamtis in 1794 revolted against the Ahom administration and captured the entire Sadiya region by killing the then *Sadiya Khowa Gohain* (the Ahom administrative officer appointed at Sadiya, the easternmost frontier of Ahom Kingdom). The *Sadiyal Miris*, the *Idu* and the Phakial tribe helped the Khamtis in this revolt and with their support the Khamti chief established their first state in Sadiya in 1793 which lasted for six years.¹⁴ After that revolt, they began to rule Sadiya by appointing two leaders Dekaraja (young king) and Buraraja (old king).¹⁵ The Khamti chief even took the title *Khowa Gohain* and was acknowledged by the Assamese rulers.¹⁶ The act of aggressively usurping a frontier area within a short period of their entry may be looked upon as their aggressive position. According to Tasoduk Hussain, Gaurinath Singha did not have time to manage the problems of the frontier region. So he had to accept the new political development at Sadiya. But according to Bhabananda Buragohain, the Khamti rulers were actually not fully independent one but they were the subjugators of the Ahom king. The civil war weakened the hold of the Ahoms in Sadiya and the Khamtis were allowed to oust the Governor (*Sadiakhowa Gohain*) and install their own leader in his place.¹⁷

However the fate of Assam was changed forever with the invasion of the Burmese. The Political Chaos resulted from civil war initiated by the Moamoriyas in the late 18th century, inspired the King Bodopaya to turn his eyes towards western direction. As Bodopaya followed an imperialist policy at that time, the 'Look West' policy of the Burmese rulers proved harmful for the separate political existence of Assam. The Ahom rulers who stood like a wall against the mighty Mughals since 16th century could not defend Assam from the Burmese in 1817. Against the subsequent Burmese invasions in 1819 and 1821 not only destroyed the entire political set up of Upper Assam but also shattered the last hope of political sovereignty of the Ahoms over Assam. And when the unstoppable Burmese reached the territory of British jurisdiction, it led to the outbreak of Anglo-Burmese War in 1824. As a result of this war the Burmese (who got defeated in the hands of the British) signed the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 and the Burmese king denounced his claim over Assam, Cachar and Jyantiya kingdom. So two political parties who had no connection with Assam or with the people of Assam) decided the fate of Assam by signing the Yandaboo treaty. Again, the Ahoms, who were legitimate rulers of Upper Assam till the 18th century was neither invited when the treaty was signed nor even discussed with them when the provisions were drafted.

Thus , the Ahom rule (who themselves came from Myanmar) who shaped the political scenario of Assam since 13th century got outnumbered by the Burmese armies after 590 years. Once again, the political economy was determined by the political mobilization from the side of Myanmar and at last paved the way for the political entry of the Europeans in the soils of North East Region.

conclusion

Trans-border migration is not a new phenomenon for Assam. Since ancient times till present the state had witnessed a long phase of migration from different international , transnational borders. As geo politically this region had close linkage with south East Asia, the frontier region witnessed close connection with Burma(Myanmar), Tibet and even China. The trade and commerce through the eastern frontier of Upper Assam supported the statement that while rest of India was more or less disconnected with the south Asian region geographically Assam and some other North Eastern States shared borders with China, Tibet and Burma and the geographical locations increased the trade, cultural and other bilateral. Translateral connection between the two sides. Even the European geographical explorers documented that the demographic settlements of the North eastern frontiers of Assam and Arunachal had its root in China, Myanmar and Thailand. The present demographic pattern of Assam were mostly influenced by the migration from the South Asian region. The 'Look East policy' of the ruler of Myanmar in the 19th century led to the three consecutive Burmese invasions to Assam Which not only gave a severe blow to the existence of the Ahom monarchy but also paved the way for the introduction of Colonial rule in the North Eastern India. Though the Ahoms were itself an outsider group but in the Ahom chronicles the Mughals and other people coming from the westward region were depicted as outsiders most commonly known as 'Bongals'. In short , the traditional approach of Close Door Policy was never exercised strictly in the context of the eastern frontier of Assam. To the cultural affinity and geo-commercial connections, the people of Assam most specifically the Brahmaputra valley always considers the migratory groups from Myanmar as half-brothers. In spite of their political rivalries these people were never treated as enemies of never watched with suspicious eyes as it was seen with the foreigners from the western direction. In short, it was the Ahoms , (a migratory group of people from South Myanmar) who gave a new dimension to the formation of Assamese identity . It was these people which strengthened the state formation process in medieval Assam. But, in the mainstream historiography of India, the transborder migration process of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh is not discussed in its proper

way yet. Still the Kahmti or Singpho migration to Assam or Arunachal Pradesh has not get proper importance in the mainstream history of medieval India. Again, the Political Again the geographical and cultural proximity of these mongoloid groups with Myanmar and South East Asian countries complicates the issue.

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