

Sino-Tibetan Elements in Placenames of Assam: An Onomastic Study

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Citation: Lekhika Gogoi (2024). Sino-Tibetan Elements in Placenames of Assam: An Onomastic Study, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1) 7540-7544
Doi 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.10709

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Naming objects is a common but essential practice. To have a name is the primary requirement for identification of any item, person or an object. Naming a place is also equally important. People name the places after some traditions and customs they perform; events with socio-political, religious and historical importance; folk beliefs; plants and animals found in the locality and so forth. The academic branch under which researchers of Humanities and Social Sciences tend to find out the causes behind naming a place is known as Onomastics. Students of Culture and Linguistics try to find out cultural and linguistic elements found in the placenames. The present paper is an attempt to locate some Sino-Tibetan elements in the placenames of Assam referring four Sino-Tibetan languages, viz. Rabha, Tiwa, Karbi and Bodo.

Keywords: *Placenames, Onomastics, Toponyms, Sino-Tibetan Language Family, Tibeto-Burman Language Family.*

Introduction

The Sino-Tibetan language family is the second largest family of languages after Indo-European in terms of native speakers comprising more than 400 languages. In India, it is primarily spoken in the northeastern region and includes languages like Manipuri (Meitei), Bodo, and various Tibeto-Burman languages. They are generally known for diversity, especially varying degrees of tonal characteristics. Tibeto-Burman is the largest branch of Sino-Tibetan languages in South Asia, with many languages spoken in India.

The Sino-Tibetan language family is a prominent linguistic group in the state of Assam, with several languages spoken by various indigenous communities. Key languages include Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, Tiwa, Rabha, and Deori, all belonging to the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan. Additionally, the Thai-Chin family, also part of Sino-Tibetan, includes languages like Khamti, Turung, Khamyang, Phake, and Aitan.

The present paper is an attempt to conduct an onomastic study to identify certain Sino-Tibetan elements in the place names of Assam. In the words of Sarat Kumar Phukan:

Onomastics is the scientific study of names. It deals with the history and origin of proper names. So, the study of place names also comes under the umbrella of Onomastics which is known as Toponymy. Toponymy is the combination of the Greek words 'Topos' (place) and 'onoma' (name). This branch of Onomastics deals with the names of villages, cities, streets, walls, fields, forests, mountains, rivers, ponds, lakes, etc. One of the concepts obtained about the study of toponymy is: "A set of place names is called 'toponymy' and their study is called 'toponomastics'" (Phukan, *Toponymy of Assam*, p. 4)

Toponymy studies the history associated with the naming process of a place and the contemporary history associated with place names and their importance. Toponymy emphasises on study of geographical location, linguistic analysis of forms and meanings, historical importance of place names, influences of place names in folklore, determination of ethnic groups, cultural elements in place names etc. Toponymy also studies the meaning, location, geography, etymology, history and archaeology related to place names in terms of contemporary resources and time.

The present paper entitled “Sino-Tibetan Elements in Placenames of Assam: An Onomastic Study” is comparatively a maiden effort. This study, therefore, may create multiple opportunities for upcoming researchers.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this study are:

- a. To identify certain place names in Assam with Sino-Tibetan roots.
- b. To study Socio-linguistic elements related to the formation and structures of various place names.
- c. To find out possible reasons behind naming the places.

Significance of the Study

The study of nominal words contributes to the development of language abundantly. Discussion on Place names provides information about the cultural heritage and origins of various names. It is also a topic to learn about the meaning, history and significance of a name. “Sino-Tibetan Elements in Placenames of Assam: An Onomastic Study” will help us to understand the historical background and cultural heritage of certain places of Assam. Observations on the formation of the words will enrich the vocabulary linguistically.

Methodologies

Two different approaches have been adopted to carry out the research. These are:

- a. Collection of Data
- b. Analysis of Data

Methods of Data Collection

Resources for this study have been collected through both primary and secondary sources. The place names have been collected through field studies. Field studies have mainly adopted two methods- Interview Method and Observation Method.

Secondary resources for the study are various relevant books, magazines, dictionaries, articles, government surveys (Census 2011), internet etc.

Methods of Data Analysis

In this study, three methods are used to analyse the data:

- a. Etymological Method
- b. Analytical Method
- c. Descriptive Method

Discussion

The present paper entitled “Sino-Tibetan Elements in Placenames of Assam: An Onomastic Study” considers the place names that are influenced by the elements of Sino-Tibetan languages viz. Rabha, Tiwa and Karbi and Bodo languages of Assam. It shows etymology and morphological structures to some extent.

Rabha Elements in Place Names

The Rabhas are one of the Tibeto-Burman indigenous communities in Assam. They are inhabitants of Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Lower Assam. Rabha society is primarily based on agriculture, skilful weaving of vibrant textiles and preparation and wearing of silver ornaments. Their language bears the features of the Tibeto-Burman group under the umbrella of the Sino-Tibetan languagefamily.

The word Rabaha > Rabha is of Garo origin, which means- ‘invited for wet cultivation to the plains’. Another meaning for ‘Rabha’ is a group of new and advanced agriculturists. Divergent views have been expressed by various scholars regarding the ethnic individuality of this tribe. According to B.H. Hodgson, “the Rabhas belong to the Great Bodo or Mech. Pani-Koch and the Rabhas have the same lineage and the latter has their connection with the Garo.” (Hodgson, *On the Aborigines of India Essays on Koch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes*, p.129)

Some place names having roots on Rabha language have been discussed below:

Ajangan < Ajagar Hachu: Ajangan < Ajagar Hachu; a *hachu*, that is, a hill in Goalpara district. *Ajangan* means an aquatic reptile. According to another interpretation, *Ajagar* is a branch of *Halu Barai* of Rabha. There is a river of West Garo hills after the name Ajagar which is known as Ajangan Hachu.

Bhakripara : Bhakripara is a village in Goalpara district. The etymology: Bakra (a deity) + Para (part of a village) suffix NIA (New Indian Arya). Another meaning for Bakhri in Rabha is to shake vehemently.

Bairong : Bairong is a village in Goalpara district. *Bai* means God and *rong* signifies prominent, fair, suitable, stone etc., that is, Bairong is believed to be a place of God.

Baida : It is place located at the district of Goalpara. *Baida* is derived from the word *Baidom* which means 'abode of god or a holy place'. Baida is a prominent religious centre of the Rabhas. It is believed that at this place the first Rabha king Dadan used to offer to his god.

Baguwan : Baguwan is a place where *Bagu Barai* of Rabha is plenty, and another meaning is a place known for wild pigs.

Bajongdoba : Bajongdoba a place known for *Kaka* bamboos, a hybrid word Rabha -*Bajong* or *Bejeng*, *Kaka* bamboo + NIA Assamese, suffix - *Doba* means plenty.

The following are some other examples of place names and their meanings in Rabha language:

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| Chekcheki | : a poetic name, a village of fishermen, cf. Rabha. Chek = fishing net. |
| Chibinong | : it is name of a place related to Lord Shiva. |
| Chikawari | : a place with suitable water. Chinkubari : a place known for Ginger cultivation. Dairong : a place where rock grinding is going on. Dakaidol : a living place of socially outcaste people. |
| Darmang Hachu | : a hill after <i>Darmang</i> , a deity. <i>Darmang</i> is treated as an evil deity. Deodori : Deodori < Deo-Daduri = a place of Goddess Daduri cf. Hindu Mahamaya. Depalchang : an area where frequent wind and storm are imminent. |
| Dhaigaon | : an extended village |
| Fedaldoba | : a natural pond. Fetengapara : a place of aggressive people. Gendara : a village of backward people |
| Habangpara | : a village known for horticulture. Halaidanga : a village famous for <i>Halai</i> , medicinal fruits. Hatakpara : a village of <i>Hatak Barai</i> , a place of worship. |
| Hatichila | : a place connected with the story of legendary Rabha king Dadan. According to the legend he killed a Hatirongkha > Hatisila i.e., an elephant here turned into a <i>Sila</i> , stone, so the name. |
| Jakuapara | : a local god of Rabha, i.e., a place of God Jakua. |
| Karaipara | : Karaipara < Karipara a place in upper stream or upland or a place of upper side. |
| Kesrapara | : a dirty place. |
| Kongkai | : a place on the dry bed of a river. |
| Kurung | : a boat making village. |
| Lalbori | : a village of deaf and dumb people. |
| Lampara | : a village on roadside Latapara/Letapara : a place known for Munga cocoon. |
| Lemakona | : a village of Aryan people. |
| Lokra | : Lokra < Lokhra, an area known for a kind of Tiger in Kamrup district. There are number of Lokra in various parts of Assam. |
| Mejenga | : a kind of Rabha Barai of Mejenga in Sivasagar near Nazira. |
| Mogho | : a place of concealment. |
| Mona-kocha | : a village known for bag makings. |
| Nalanga | : a hill and <i>beel</i> , also a place of reeds. Odalbakra : a place of plenty of Odal tree with barren land. Pantan : an area where tall trees are plenty. |
| Poitari | : a safe place in a high altitude. |
| Rongchai | : a river with stones. |
| Rongchapara | : an unsuitable place or a rocky land. |
| Rongdama | : stony village. |
| Rongdoba | : a rivulet with stones. Rongkhanpara : a Rabha Barai village. |
| Rongpathar | : a paddy field with stones. Rongsongpara : an area of stones with heavy rain. |
| Sarapara | : a good place for habitation. |

Tiwa Elements in Placenames

The Tiwa (also known as Lalung) are an indigenous community primarily residing in the central Assam in the districts of Nagaon, Morigaon, Karbi Anglong, Dhemaji, Kamrup as well as the Khasi and Jaintia Hills district in Meghalaya.

The name 'Lalung' is given by their neighbours but they prefer to call themselves as Tiwa. The word *Lalung* juxtaposition of two words *La* (water) and *lung* (rescued). As per Karbi tradition, it has been derived from the word *Langlut*; *Lang* = water or river, *lut* = came by floating or came downwards. It is believed that *Le*, a group of people came downward through the river Brahmaputra.

The word *Tiwa* also has meaning related to water. *Ti* = water or river and *wa* = superior. As the Lalungs landed on the plains following the course of the river Brahmaputra, they introduced themselves as 'Tiwa' to the inquisitive non-Tiwas. It was believed that the Lalung or Tiwas were originally from Tibet region. B.N. Bardoloi in his book *Tribes of Assam: Part I* writes,

It is quite probable that 'Tiwa' derives its origin to the term 'Tibbatia' meaning people hailing from Tibbet. In course of time the word Tibbetia might have changed into 'Tiwa.' The Lalung was a ruling community in Assam and their kingdom was at Nelli-Baghara-Topakuchi. (Bardoloi, p. 76)

A few Tiwa toponym terminologies are:

Khunji : a village, or part of a village. For example: Kromkhunji, Pati-Khunji, Thorakhunji, Khonkhaplangkhunji, Pongkrakhunji, Kathalaikhunji, Uthangkhunji, Singlangkhunji and Punbakhunji etc.

Kuchi : Village. For example: Topakuchi, Guwakuchi, Gayakuchi, Patarkuchi etc.

Karbi Elements in Placenames

The Karbis, mentioned as the Mikir (alternate names- Arleng Alam, Karbi Karbak, Manchat, Mikir, Mikiri, Nihang, Puta) in the Constitution Order of the Government of India, are one of the major ethnic groups in Northeast India and especially in the Karbi-Anglong district of Assam. They prefer to call themselves Karbi, and sometimes Arleng (literally 'man' in the Karbi language). The term Mikir is now not preferred and is considered to be derogatory term. The Karbis linguistically belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. They have various dialects such as Chingthang (Jynthong), Mirlong and Rong Kethang (Rengkhang, Rongkhang).

They have suffixes like *Langchu* = water or river, *Arlong* = a hill, *Rong* = a village and so on. Some examples of such place names are given below:

Arnam Aterang : As per Karbi legend- Arnam Aterang is a place near the river Telah. *Arnam* a Lord, a God; *Terang* a house, i.e., an abode of God.

Boithalangchu : Pronunciation *Wat-hat-langchu*, means a fowl was sacrificed on a bank of a rivulet. Wat-hat-langchu or Boithalangchu is an urban centre today.

Chamilangchu : A tributary to the *Hargathi*.

Chinthong-Arong : A toponym after a Karbi clan's name. *Chinthong* is revered as one of the important gods of the Karbis, who is a divine musician.

Chocheng-Arleng : The first Karbi village was established at this place. *Chocheng* = sharer of

Rangchina's head, i.e., intelligent people; *Arleng* = hill.

Dongkamoka : *Dong* = canal, *mokak* means looking like a rainbow, i.e., the shape of a rivulet is semicircle.

Dumrali : A plain area means for Plain Karbis.

Dumra : A fig tree. A Karbi kingdom near Sonapur. *Dumra* cf. Assamese Dimoria.

Hamren : A place with thousands of houses in rows. A long shade for resting in the festive occasion.

Hangjanglangchu : Means a rivulet with Hajong-Adong i.e., plenty of mustards all around.

Hayong : An old habitat of the Karbis between Dimapur and the river Kopili.

Hidibonglong : Means a Karbi village surrounded by other people. *Hiddi* = the earth, land;

bonglong = surround.

Hidipi : A big agricultural village.

Hing-harlong : A holy or divine place of the Karbis.

Inghi-Arong : A village name derives from Inghi clan of Karbis.

Karkak : A village surrounding a banyan tree.

Kazironga : *Kazi*, a personal name of a Karbi lady, *rong*, a village cf. Tai-Ahom defines it to be a home of one hon rhino.

Kupli : A river with gorgeous sounds.

Langcho-Mepi : A tributary of river Kopili. **Langchuliat** : A rivulet flowing slowly.

Langchung Langting : A rivulet with waterfalls. **Langhin** : A speedy river.

Langkiding : A lengthy river.

Langnimchu : A river with youthful character.

Lang-pih : A big river.

Langchomepi : A river with full of rapids.

Langtibuk : A river bed with numerous potholes.

Lunse-Harlong : A singer stone. A hill connected with divine singer Rangchina-Sarpo.

Okerenlangchu : A rivulet with variety of fishes.

Pinpo : A village of high nobles i.e., Minister.

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| Rongchek | : A village of bamboos. Rongkoroi | : A village in a <i>Koroi</i> tree jungle. |
| Rongphar | : Combination of two villages. | |
| Teklangchu | : A river where tiger used to have water and so on. | |

Bodo Elements in Placenames

The Bodos reside in the northwestern parts of Assam and the Kachari is their sub-branch. They dwell on the Brahmaputra valley. The word 'Bodo' has been derived from the word 'Bod' means Tibet, thus signifying that majority of the Bodos arrive in Northeast India through Bhutan passes. The Bodos represent one of the largest of the 18 ethnic sub-groups within the Kachari group, first classified in the AD 19th century.

The Bodos left a big systematic legacy on toponyms of Northeast India through various branches of toponymy such as: geographical (physical, bio-geographical, cultural and so on), historical, hydronymy, oronymy, hodonymy, anthroponymy and misc. etc. A few examples are:

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|---------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| Diju | : a river on the high hills | | |
| Lamding | : a straight road | Dirgumma | : a river with grasshoppers |
| with muddy water | | Diphu | : a river |
| Habung | : a wide plain land | | |
| Hakama | : a land of concealment | | |
| Harangajhao | : a sloppy land | | |
| Hakra | : a land for jhum cultivation | | |
| Haflong | : an ant hill | | |
| Hajo | : a hilly land | | |
| Longkhor | : a stony place | | |
| Maibong | : a place of plenty of rice | | |
| Mairon | : a rice producing area | | |
| Dimu | : a source of river | Khoirabari | : a place of Khira tree |
| tree | | Udalguri | : a place of udal |
| Chamthaibari | : a place with a kind grass and so on | | |

Findings and Conclusion

This research work has certain findings as follows:

- Huge variety has been noticed in naming the places.
- In naming the places, influences of linguistic elements of the ethnic tribes such as Rabha, Tiwa, Karbi, Bodo is abundant.
- A good number of place names of Assam are found to be plant-based, river-centric, animal-centric, personal, occupation based and related to food items.
- When studying place names, it has been found that various socio-cultural, historical and folkloristic factors are involved in the formation of the names.
- Various toponyms are formed by combining two or more free forms. In some exceptional cases, a bound form also follows a free form.
- Moreover, formation of place names is seen through addition of suffixes and prefixes with nouns.

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