



A study on the role of Tiwas (Lalungs) and their settlements in the medieval period of Assam history.

Bandana Baruah

Department of History, Cotton College, Guwahati, India.

Abstract

The Tiwas who in all early writings are mentioned as Lalungs comprise one of the numerous tribes of Assam. Ethnically belonging to the Mongoloid stock they migrated and settled in Jayantia territory a long time ago. Owing to differences among them over the issue of acceptance of matrilineal system a group of them left Jayantia territory and sought refuge in Ahom territory. The Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-1663) took pity on them and ordered the Rahial Baruah to settle them in Raha area in five principalities each under a Tiwa (Lalung) chief. Later Tiwa (Lalung) migrants were settled by Jagialia Gohain in seven more principalities each again under their chiefs called Rajas. In return for the privileges they obtained from the Ahom king the Rajas owed allegiance, paid tribute and assisted the Ahom monarchs in their war campaigns. The different *Buranjis* form the primary data of this paper and secondary sources have also been supplemented in an objective manner. The study is from a historical perspective and would throw light on the role of Tiwa (Lalung) chieftains and their settlement areas in the medieval period of Assam History.

Keywords : Ahom kings, *Buranjis*, Medieval Assam History, Tiwa (Lalung) chieftains and principalities.

1. Introduction

The medieval period of Assam History begins with the Ahom kingdom, the foundation of which was laid by Sukapha in 1228 CE. Since then different Ahom rulers ruled Assam for almost six hundred years. The Ahom government was a monarchical oligarchy. The king or *Swargadeo* as he was addressed, was the supreme head of the state but he had to act according to the advice of the three councilors of state, Burha Gohain, Bar Bargohain and Barpatra Gohain. Besides them, there were several other officials with different designations who were entrusted to look after different matters and areas of the land. Gradually the Ahom dominion extended towards the west. In course of its expansion the different Ahom kings were

confronted with different problems. The kings had to send expeditions against the Kacharis and Jayantias who were their vassals but who tried to assert their independence when-ever the opportunity arose. Their greatest achievement was their victory over the Mughals. Much of their time was also spent in suppressing the Moamaria insurrections which sapped the vitality of the kingdom. The Ahom kings adopted different approaches with regard to the plains and hill tribes. Their relations with the various hill tribes were conducted by frontier wardens or officers appointed by them and was one of conciliation though co-civenceness was also resorted to when the occasion demanded. The Ahom kings did not annex their territories as the difficulties of communication

restrained them and they were content with submission and payment of annual tributes.

2. Objectives

The objectives of the study are :

- a) To find out the Tiwa (Lalung) settlements.
- b) To explore the role of the Tiwas (Lalungs) in the medieval period of Assam History.

3. Database and methodology

The study had been undertaken by using both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include the different Buranjis, namely, Deodhai Asam Buranji, Tungkhungia Buranji, both English and Assamese versions, Kachari Buranjis, Jayantia Buranji, Assam Buranji, Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singha for understanding the events of the reigns of the different Ahom monarchs who ruled Assam for an unprecedented almost six centuries and how the Tiwa Lalung chieftains assisted the Ahom kings. The secondary sources include Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India for an insight into the migration of the Tiwa (Lalung) community from their homeland including L.Devi's Ahom Tribal relations. Care has been taken to collect relevant data for historical reconstruction and study of the tribe and their settlement patterns by visiting the aforesaid areas and interviewing Tiwa (Lalung) titular chieftains who are still addressed as Rajas by their own community. Field investigation was substantiated with published works. Data thus collected have been verified by cross references and critical analysis.

4. Discussion

The frontiers of the Ahom kingdom were protected from the inroads of the hill people by several wardens, the Sadiya-Khowa Gohain, the Marangi-Khowa Gohain, the Solal Gohain the Jagalia Gohain and the Kajalimukhia Gohain and they were always selected from the families of the three Gohains at the metropolis.(Bhuyan,1990). By the first half of the sixteenth century when Suhungmung (1497-1539) was the Ahom king, the Ahoms had extended their dominion in the west upto the Kalang river in

Nowgong district by defeating the Kacharis. To the west of the Kachari kingdom lay the Jayantia kingdom and the Ahoms first came into contact with them during the reign of Pratap Singha (1603-1641) at the beginning of the 17th century(Devi,1968) The Ahom Jayantia relations are important as three Tiwa principalities namely Gobha, Khola and Nellie were under the Jayantias.

It was the Jayantia king, Jasamanik who took the initiative of establishing friendly relations with the Ahom king, Pratap Singha by offering him a princess and pleading for land to set up a market at Phulaguri with Kalang river as boundary.(Bhuyan,1964) In response to the Ahom king, the Kajalimukhia Langiphukan stated that since fish, deer, firewood were brought from there and if the Jayantias could give fish and firewood, then Phulaguri could be set up as a market place. The king agreed and gave his consent to the Jayantia king and so the market which was earlier set up under two trees in Sonabor-Rupabor area were shifted to Phulaguri. Since then the Rajas of Gobha, Nellie and Khala settled in the plains. (Bhuyan,1964). Friendship with the Ahoms was mainly sought for derivation of commercial advantages but friendship with the Ahoms led to the subordination of the Jayantias and the Ahoms treated them as their vassals.

During the reign of Ahom king, Pratap Singha (1603-1641 CE) the Mughals invaded Assam. The Tiwa chiefs of Gobha, Nelli and Khala who were hitherto under the Jayantia king feeling insecure made their submission to the Ahom King Jayadvaj Singha. The latter is said to have established them in their ancestral possessions and made them tributary to the Ahom government which incurred the displeasure of the Jayantia king as the principalities were situated at the entrances of the three passes leading to the Jayantias hills, and hence resented Ahom domination over them.(Devi,1968). The Jayantia king Jasamattarai requested the Ahom king Jayadvaj Singha (1648-1663) to return back those provinces. But the Ahom King declined and replied that it had been a tradition that kings made friendship by exchanging princesses, elephants, horses and other presents, but not by ceding

territories.(Dutta,1991) This issue led to embitterment between the Ahoms and the Jayantias for quite sometime and the Tiwa principalities of Gobha, Nellie and Khala remained a bone of contention. Ultimately however, the three principalities were returned back to the Jayantias but when exactly they were returned has not been recorded.

4.1. The Lalungs claim to be autochthones of the Jayantia hills (Grierson,1967).The Rahial Barua saw fire on the tops of the neighbouring hills and on enquiry during the reign of Ahom king, Jayadhvaj Singha, it had come to light that they were escapist from Jayantia territory in search of new settlement as they did not approve of the matrilineal social system prevalent there and preferred patrilineal mode of inheritance. (Bhuyan,1962). As a result of a negotiation, twelve families of Mikirs and twelve families of Lalungs migrated to the Ahom territories. Their leaders were taken to the presence of the Ahom king Jayadhvaj Singha who promised them protection and the benefit of the equitable usages of his country according to which a son could inherit his father's property.(Bhuyan,1962).The first batch of Tiwa (Lalung) migrants were settled in five different areas in Raha each under a Chief who was addressed as Raja by their own men. These five principalities were Tapakuchi, Baropujia, Mikirgaon, Sorah and Khaigor. The (Rajas) chiefs of these areas were collectively called *Paacho Rajas* or *Pachrajia*.

Later Lalung migrants were settled by the Jagialia Gohain in seven more principalities namely, Kumoi, Sukhnaguha, Ghagua, Tetelia, Kacharigaon, Taraani and Baghara. (Bhuyan,1975) Each of these principalities too were under a Chief whom the Tiwas (Lalungs) addressed them as Raja and these Rajas were collectively called *Saato Rajas* or *Satrajia*. During the reign of Rajeshwar Singha, Kirtichandra Barbarua reorganized the outpost at Raha and fixed the jurisdiction of the petty chieftains of Sora, Khahigoria, Topakuchia, Baropujia and Mikir. (Bhuyan,1990). The vassal

chieftains on the Assam frontier were bound by treaty terms to render timely assistance to their liegelord.(Bhuyan,1990). The *Paacho Rajas* and *Saato Rajas* called *Powali Rajas* by the Ahom kings had their own set of officials with different designations to assist them in their day to day work.

4.2. The Ahoms regarded the Kachari kings as their vassal but during their pre-occupation against the Mughals, the Kachari king Tamradhvaj Narayan took advantage of the situation and asserted his independence. Rudra Singha the Ahom king was enraged and resolved to reduce the Kachari king to submission. He therefore embarked on an expedition in 1706 and divided his forces into two divisions to Cachar, one under the Barbarua through the Dhansiri route and the other under the Paniphukan through the Kapili route. (Devi,1968) Under Paniphukan went the Kaliabaria Phukan, Pani Abhoypuria Rajkhowa, Panisolguria Rajkhowa and others. Besides them, Chetia Konwar, Dimoruwa Raja, Ghagua Raja, Mikir Raja, Kumoi Raja, Lalung Raja, Topakuchi Raja and other *daantiyolia* Rajas. (Bhuyan,1984). In that expedition, the Kacharis were defeated by the Ahoms and by February 1707 the Ahom troops succeeded in occupying Maibang, the Kachari capital. The Kachari king, Tamradhvaj Narayan fled from Maibang to Khaspur (Bhuyan,1984) But from there he was taken a prisoner by the Jayantia king, Raja Ram Singha by a stratagem and imprisoned him in Jayantipur. (Bhuyan, 1984). Tamradhvaj managed to send a letter to the Ahom king asking for forgiveness for his past offences and requesting for rescue from his captor. (Bhuyan,1964)

Rudra Singha was glad at the submissive attitude of Tamradhvaj Narayan, the Kachari king and his request for help. He therefore seized the opportunity and sent a message to Ram Singha, the Jayantia king who was also a vassal of the Ahom king to release the Kachari King, Tamradhvaj forthwith. But Ram Singha refused to comply with the order as it was addressed by

the Barphukan. (Bhuyan,1984).Rudra Singha then informed the chieftains of Gobha,Nellie and Khola about the hostile attitude of their liegeland, the Jayantia Raja.(Bhuyan,1984).The Ahoms then set up their camp at Bardowa and sent two forces against Jayantia, one by the Gobha route under Barphukan and the other by the Kapili route under the Barbarua. The Topakuchi Tiwa Raja is said to have collected seven hundred soldiers and under the Solal Gohain assisted the Ahom King in the invasion of the Jayantia kingdom. (Bhuyan, 1984). This expedition resulted in the capture and deportation of Ram Singh along with his eldest son to the Ahom kingdom. Ram Singh died of small pox in captivity. His eldest son Barkonwar was released later on and installed as Jayantia Raja as *Thapita Sanchita* meaning established and preserved ruler of the Ahom king, on condition of paying an annual tribute to the Ahom king. But Barkonwar never paid tribute, as a consequence of which he was made prisoner for fourteen years by the Ahom government and markets and passes were closed to the Jayantia traders. (Bhuyan, 1968). The Hill Jayantias were largely dependent for their supplies of necessaries on the markets of the plains. So the closing of the markets and the passes through which they came down to the plains caused great economic hardship to them. (Devi,1968).

4.3. Rudra Singha next envisaged for a fresh war against the Mughals. He sought the co-operation of all the Hindu Rajas as they were all vassals of the Mughals and they supported his Bengal invasion. He proceeded in person to Gauhati and mobilized a strong army of 400,000 and planned to enter the Mughal territory in November 1714. In this endeavour the Ahom king commanded the Barphukan to issue orders to all the chiefs and the Topakuchi Raja, Gobha Raja and Nellie Raja besides others, arrived with their quota of men to assist the king.(Sarma,ed,1927) . But all these preparations were in vain as Rudra Singha died suddenly in his camp at Gauhati and his

immediate successors did not follow up his plan.

4.4. During the reign of the Ahom king, Siva Singha (1714-1744) the Jayantia envoys apprehending danger did not enter the Ahom kingdom but prayed to the Ahom government through an Ahom envoy for opening up of markets and passes.at Phulaguri. (Bhuyan, 1964) Siva Singha considered it unsafe to have inimical neighbours and hence expressed his desire to resolve the matter amicably. This encouraged the Jayantias and led Sarukonwar,who was managing the administration as his brother, Barkonwar the king, was imprisoned, to open up negotiations with the Ahom government for a peaceful settlement of the dispute through the mediation of the Dimarua Raja. Accordingly, envoys were sent to the Dimarua Raja with a request to pray to the Barphukan on behalf of Jayantia for the opening up of Gobha duar or pass (Bhuyan, 1964). The Dimarua Raja was directed by the Barphukan to inform the Jayantia king to come in person with presents to pray for the opening up of passes and the markets. The Khola Raja, a Tiwa chieftian under the Jayantia King also sent an envoy to the Burhagohain with the same prayer and he responded by asking the envoy to send the three *dolois* representing Gobha, Nellie and Khala as before for the opening up of the markets and passes. According to the command of the Burhagohain, on 22nd June, 1716 the three dolois of Gobha, Nellie and Khala (all Tiwa chieftains) came to Jagi outpost and prayed to the *Chokial Barua* (officer in charge) to negotiate with the three Rajas for the opening up of the passes and the markets. In response they were told to send a good man from the Jayantia king. (Devi,1968). The Jayantia king responded by sending a man named Binanda to the Jagi outpost but this particular person died. The *Chokial Barua* then asked the Jayantia king to send another man. Next time Raghunath was sent. The three frontier Rajas at first declined to escort the Jayantia envoy, Raghunath to the Ahom outpost but ultimately had to abide by the orders of the *Chokial Barua*.

On January 11, 1724, the Jayantia envoy was given farewell by the Barphukan with a direction to tell the Jayantia king that passes and markets were opened only because of the unsettled condition of the Jayantia kingdom and his repeated prayers. Further, he was told that to get the favour of the Ahom king, the Jayantia king should render his allegiance to the Ahom king annually through worthy persons. Failure to comply with this condition will result in the discontinuance of everything. (Bhuyan, 1964). In reply, the Jayantia envoy again prayed for the opening up of the markets at Phulaguri so that the Jayantias and the Mikirs might earn their livelihood. The Barphukan there-upon emphasised the fact that for the desired result he must send the three Rajas, of Gobha, Nellie and Khala, all Tiwa chieftains along with his Laskar to Jagi. The refusal of the Jayantia envoy to concede to this demand of sending the three Rajas of Gobha, Nellie and Khala together with the Laskar led to the breakdown of all negotiations between the two governments. (Devi, 1968). To compel them the Ahom king ordered the invasion of Gobha, Nellie and Khala, the three Tiwa principalities under the Jayantias anticipating that the Jayantia king would come to terms, because these three passes were vital through which trade was carried out. There-after the Ahom army marched against the three Tiwa principalities of Gobha, Nellie and Khala accompanied by the Dimarua Raja and assembled at a place by the side of the Killing river and remained there after fortifying a fort. The Gobha Raja then sent two princes accompanied by three men to the Dimarua Raja. The Dimarua Raja produced them to the Barphukan. When the Barphukan asked them for what had they come, they responded that as they were subordinate to the Ahom king like the Dimarua Raja. The three Tiwa chieftains of Gobha, Nellie and Khala also apprised the Barphukan of their fear on the construction of forts and pleaded for its early destruction. The Barphukan in reply assured the personal safety

of the three kings and asked them to come to him to offer their prayer. (Devi, 1968). The Barphukan waited for a few days for their arrival but in vain. Ultimately when none of them came the Barphukan ordered his men to set fire to their villages and capture their cows and buffaloes.

About that time the Barphukan's wife died of small pox and the king permitted the Barphukan leave but being apprehensive of the unsettled condition, the Barphukan refused to leave. A fugitive in the meantime had come from Gobha and informed the Barphukan that about 700 Jayantias had placed themselves under the three Tiwa chieftains of Gobha, Nellie and Khala to attack the Ahom forts. (Devi, 1968). The Barphukan got frightened and ordered shifting of the Ahom forces. When the forces were shifted, the Jayantias took advantage and rushed forward against the Ahoms but had to retreat at the sight of the Ahom forces. The Ahoms forces crossed the river Kalang and moved to Jagi. (Devi, 1968). Receiving the news, Siva Singha charged the Barphukan with the offence of ordering the retreat of the forces and shifting of forces. The Barphukan replied that it was done in accordance with the advice of the Dimarua Raja who in turn stated that the presence of the forces in front of them dissuaded the Jayantias and the three Tiwa chieftains of Gobha, Nellie and Khala from coming to terms with the Ahoms. (Devi, 1968).

Again in order to persuade the Jayantias to come to terms, the Dimarua Raja advised the Barphukan to send the two imprisoned princes of Gobha and Nagayan from Gauhati to Dimarua. Accordingly, the Barphukan acceded to his advice but very soon the princes made good their escape. The Dimarua Raja was therefore imprisoned for a month and in the meantime the Barphukan died of small pox. (Devi, 1968).

The Jayantias then began their raiding operations on Dimarua. On receiving such news, the Ahom king Siva Singha ordered the new Barphukan to attack Gobha, Nellie and Khala the

three Tiwa principalities under the Jayantias and to loot their cows and buffaloes by devastating their villages. The order was put into effect. The Barphukan also warned the Jayantias not to carry on illegal trade with the Assamese but instead to pray to the Ahom king for opening of passes and markets. This stern warning produced the desired effect. After a month elapsed the three Tiwa Chiefs of Gobha, Nellie and Khala were sent to the Jagi outpost along with presents by the Jayantia king to pray for the opening up of markets and passes. When they were received by the Barphukan, they agreed to pay tributes and send men to serve under the Ahom king according to the terms of the agreement of 1708. The Barphukan agreed to comply with their prayer and directed them to send men to serve under the Ahom king and pay annual tributes to him regularly in order to have permanent arrangements with regard to the markets and passes (Devi, 1968). But this time the markets were allowed to be held at Hatiarmukh on the south of the Kalang instead of at Phulaguri, on the north of the Kalang. No further mention is made of the Jayantias in the Buranjis till the reign of Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769).

4.5. The reign of the Ahom king Lakshmi Singha (1769-80) witnessed the first challenge to the Ahom monarchy. It was organized by a group of disgruntled Vaishnava devotees of the Mayamara Satra, a socio-religious sect founded by Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva in 1601 CE. Ahom king, Siva Singha was greatly influenced by the Brahmin priests. On being predicted about his dethronement he therefore surrendered his regalia to his chief queen, Phuleswari Devi, with the title of Bar-rajā. Phuleswari Devi like Siva Singha was so over enthusiastic with the new faith that she too in her enthusiasm compelled even the Vaishnava devotees to bow their heads before the deity and accept *nirmali* and *prasad*. This provoked the Vaishnavas as they did not worship any idol except Vishnu and this was strictly observed by the devotees of the Mayamara Satra. Of all the Vaishnavas the head of the Mayamara Satra was most offended. Terming all these

activities as insults coupled with various other issues the movement which started on a religious issue soon engulfed different areas of Ahom kingdom. The first Moamaria rebellion broke out in October 1769 under the leadership of Nahar Khora Saikia and Raghav Moran. The Ahom king was alarmed and realizing the gravity of the situation summoned a council of his nobles to decide the course of action as the tense revolutionary atmosphere engulfed to the north bank of the Brahmaputra. In the council it was decided to seek help from the vassal states of Rani, Luki and Topakuchi, besides others. The Barbarua was directed to bring a quota of soldiers from these areas. The Barbarua acting accordingly proceeded to those principalities and brought their contingent along with their chiefs. The chieftains were then dispatched with the Gargayan Dekaphukan along the Dhai-ali route. Then Ragha Moran encountered the chiefs of Rani, Luki and Topakuchi at the terminus of Dhai-ali and there ensued a battle between the two armies. (Bhuyan, 1990). The chiefs of Rani and Luki were vanquished and they left the field. The Moamarias chased them and killed many of their soldiers. The royalist troops were defeated in several engagements. The king, Lakshmi Singha was caught and held captive and the rebels occupied Rangpur, the Ahom capital. (Bhuyan, 1990). For several months there was no opposition to Moamaria rule. In 1770 however Lakshmi Singha recovered his throne through a stratagem.

4.6. Lakshmi Singha was succeeded by his son Gaurinath Singha, 1780-1795. He was a bitter foe of the Moamarias and lost no opportunity of oppressing them. He sent an appeal for help to the Kachari and Jayantia kings but they refused to help. He again sought help from the chiefs of Rani, Luki and Topakuchi. Accordingly when the chiefs were on their way from Gauhati to Rangpur and were halting at Pahumara they were attacked by the Moamarias and all of them fell in the battle. (Bhuyan, 1990).

In such a situation Gaurinath Singh appealed to the British Governor General Lord

Cornwallis for help as some of the disturbing elements in his kingdom were British subjects. Lord Cornwallis in response sent Captain Welsh with troops and very soon all the unruly elements were defeated including the Moamarias and captured Rangpur from their clutches and restored Gaurinath Singha to his throne. (Bhuyan,1990). Kamaleshwar Singha (1795-1811) succeeded Gaurinath Singha and during his reign the Moamarias repeated their revolt sometimes in league with the Daflas and sometimes in alliance with the Singphos. During that period of chaos and confusion many Moamarias took refuge in the Jayantia and Kachari kingdoms. Some of the Tiwa chiefs too turned hostile and went over to the side of the rebellious Moamarias. The Moamarias allied with the Kacharis and Tiwas (Lalungs) living in Nowgong and indulged in depredations in Ahom territory. As the Kachari king did not cooperate with Ahom king in sending back the rebels, expeditions were sent against Kachari kingdom. (Devi, 1968). The Phukan charged seven Saikias of Nowgong and four Raja powalis of *Satrajia* and *Pachrajia* with the offence of being in league with the Moamarias and put them to death.(Bhuyan,1990)

11. Conclusion

The Tiwas, who presently reside both in the plains districts and hill district of Karbi-Anglong in Assam/India, have a glorious past. No doubt one group of them moved away from the original settlement area in Jayantia territory because of their disapproval of matrilineal system yet there exists some strong sense of underlying unity amongst them. They did not have independent status in the medieval period under the Ahoms but the Ahom monarch, Jayadhvaj Singha sympathized with their cause and settled them in Ahom territory which led to the formation of the Tiwa settlements, Topakuchi, Baropujia, Sorah, Khaigor and Mikirgaon which exist to this day yet, never interfered in their internal administration. Later Tiwa migrants were settled in Jagi area in seven different areas, namely Kumoi, Baghara, Tetelia, Kumoi-Kacharigaon, Sukhnaguha, Ghagua and Taraani. Again it was the Ahom monarch, Pratap Singha who accorded permission to the Jayantias to set up a market at Phulaguri with Kalang river as boundary from which time onwards the Tiwas came to inhabit Gobha, Nellie and Khala. The Tiwas have made significant contribution to the history of Assam and hence their role must not be marginalised or immersed in oblivion.

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