

Volume 3

Issue 1

ISSN : 2456-8228
January-December 2018



DERA NATUNG GOVERNMENT COLLEGE RESEARCH JOURNAL

DERA NATUNG GOVERNMENT COLLEGE

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Origin of the Adis: A Polemical Discourse

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Abstract

In tribal worldview, the conception of origin and migratory legends often stems from mythological nuances. The similar case is also evidently traced and pursued in context of the Adis residing in central belt of Arunachal Pradesh. Hence, this paper attempts to reflect the idea of Adi origin and migration from the existing domains of arbitrary stances in discursive way. Also, it trysts to extrapolate the juxtaposing constructs of both mythical and methodical parameters in scholastic approach.

Keywords: Origin, Migration, Mythology, Clans, Settlement, Tibetan and Burma/China

Introduction

The veracity of discourses on the origin and migration of highland people of far-east Himalaya still remains vague. In this context, Blackburn (2004:15) affirms, “No one knows, with certainty, when or by what route the people of Arunachal Pradesh came to their current homelands”. The paucity of literature implies as major setback; delimiting the decipherability of origin and migratory course. Also, Blackburn implies that before the British expeditionary records chronicled in early nineteenth century, only two sets of sources cited the hill tribes: the Tibetan texts which specified contact among the Tibetans and some tribes in the northern border in fifteenth century. The Ahom Buranjis serves as the other source citing conflict with tribes towards south with Assam from seventeenth century. Besides, various Sanskrit texts and archaeological remnants provide information on the early medieval periods (Chowdhury, 1990:139). Among early written records, Fr. Krick “Account of an Expedition among the Abors in 1853” drew the first inference of Adi origin by stating.”

“When the earth was a mud but, God came down from Heaven; with a handful of mud he made two brothers and two sisters. The Padams descend from the elder, and the Miris from the younger brother. Hence the Padams are a privileged race, living in plenty and invincible on the battlefield.” (Krick, 1913).

However, the observation here is entirely of a missionary’ take that quotes god as he (based on male figure of Christian theology). It appears inapt since the Adis adheres to Donyipolo (of male and female genders) and draws their origin from Kéyüm-Kéro (a void cosmic state). Of the colonial accounts, Dunbar (1916:12-15) found a mysterious migratory route from the “central Asia” mountains and proof of dispersal down along the rivers to current settlement area.

The oral tradition and early history are mostly ritual texts and barely tells of historical migration. Hitherto, the memories of migration are strong and have cognizance of being non- native to the region and having migrated from “somewhere else” (Blackburn, 2004:15). One of the Adi migratory legends of the Northern Adis construes their origin from Doying-Lídüng (Story of Stone) or Jasüng-Koräh (called by neighbouring Buddhist Memba tribe) located at Jido² (an Adi village) contiguous to Tuting town in Upper Siang district. As per the legend, a “mystical stone” embodying physicality of bird with figurative head and wings is believed to have hovered down from Tibet to the present site³. The Adis interprets that the aerial figure promptly landed on the spot and broke the right wing (as the strange figure appears to be with a broken wing). It transformed into a mysterious stone called Karí-Léläm (human footprint) engraved with several marks of birds and animals foot prints. It is thus fathomed that after the emergence of universe and living beings; as the earthly entities (soil and stone) were fragile, the creatures of animal kingdom moved out to world by leaving behind footprints upon the stone. Among the human race, Karí (brother of Toro), a mythical figure made the first step on the stone and so the stone is revered as Karí-Léläm. The sacred site is often mentioned in oral readings of the Adi Miris, chanting, “Mibo ké léji pérying...Uyu ké lo:päng noné”. Similarly, the Ayit-Miris (priest expert in summoning lost human soul) probes the stone for whereabouts of the wandering soul and seeks approval to return back to the world (after finding the soul). At present, the Adis and Memba regard the site as sacred and faithfully walk around for 3 to 5 times before prayers. However, the Membas claim the place as their native source of origin, even though traced within an Adi village.



Fig.1: Doying-Lídüing (left) and a wing-like figure (right) found at Jido village of Tuting Sub-Division, Upper Siang district



Fig.2: Karí-Léläm (left) and a spherical stone (right), believed to cure sickness when carried in baby-wearing manner for five times

In case of the western Adis, the legends explain Ramos and Bokars as brothers (Joshi, 2005:87-89). The Ramos originally settled in Tatadege area and later moved down to Rapum (present settlement area). The Bokars, who dwelled in Pui, adjacent to Tatadege were pushed across the border by Tibetans, until they drifted down and settled in the vicinity of Tungu La Pass and, Yumi and Nayü valleys. The Pailibos residing in Dosing village moved southwards and drifted along the right bank of Siyom River due to natural calamities and settled in Yipik. In migratory course, the Boris settled in the east and Ashings towards the northernmost place (ibid, 2005); while the Tangams deviated to Kuging area.

With regard to recent scholarly literatures, Huber and Blackburn (2012:83) observed “Unfortunately, most existing writings on the topic are unsatisfactory in that they offer only very speculative and sweeping – in terms of time and space – reconstructions

based primarily upon claims found in local narratives”. The oral narratives and erudite writings draw forth the stories of origin and migration sharing common premises. It reveals a propensity of cohesion in pursuit and claim over the subject of the region. Both types of sources aptly plot the routes of migration from assumed original homeland and present dwelling areas. It demonstrates the identity of contemporary populations with their supposed ancestors from the past and distant places with explicit claims of ethnic continuity. In the current approach, most of the writings, oral stories and other associated discourses are adoptive of unwritten source and uncritically incorporated by scholars to reconstruct the “historical faiths” (ibid, 2012: 94). In purview of scholastic debates of local or regional scholars, since tribes are categorized speaking Tibeto- Burman language, it suggests their original place in east or north of the Himalayas or beyond the Patkai hill. Thus, the possibilities have split historical writings of central territory into two camps – one advocating homeland to be Tibet in north and the other arguing from east where

Northern Burma touches southwest China. Hence, Blackburn conceives a new theory “Tibetan and the Burma/China hypothesis” for dealing with origin and migratory conjecture of tribes in the region (Blackburn, 2004:20).

According to the stated hypothesis, the Burma/China hypothesis mainly derives from early scholarly writings of Tibeto-Burman languages and recent support from ethno-linguistic research. For instance, the first modern study of Tibeto-Burman language by Konow suggests the homeland of languages spoken in central Arunachal was northern Burma (ibid, 2004:20). Likewise, Van Driem (2001:410) recognizes Sichuan (Yunnan) province as the “geographical centre of gravity” of migration to Brahmaputra valley along the hills. In this approach, most of the historians notwithstanding uncertain of reliable chronology and geography, argues that the tribes advanced towards west (in Patkai hills) and entered Brahmaputra valley and moved further northwards (Blackburn, 2004:20). In contrary, the Tibetan theory postulates a distinct assumption surmising the migration of Tani (tribes) from the point from where the two rivers (Subansiri in Tsari territory and Siang (Tsangpo) cut through the Himalayas and flows into state (ibid, 2004:21). In substantiation of this theory, Sun (1993:10) states -

“A number of facts suggest that the Tani speakers represent relatively recent wave of Tibeto-Burman migrations to Arunachal Pradesh...first, the migration routes recorded in the oral traditions of many northern Tani tribes such as Ramo, Bokar, Tagin and Simong, point unambiguously to southern Tibet as their original habitat”.

In another case, the Bokars (Adi sub-tribe) of Siyom (in West Siang district) developed trivial and semi-permanent reserves along Neyü Phu Chu in Tibet to trade with the adjacent Tibetan settlements (Huber and Blackburn, 2012:100). As a result, the Bokars adopted certain aspects of the Tibetan dress (though worn in their own specific style) and dietary habits.

In current vogue, the writers mostly argue from either Tibetan or Burmese hypothesis while reflecting the origin and migration of central tribes. However, the majority of local and regional scholars champion the Tibetan view; since many rely on native oral traditions of the tribes – tracing migration from north to south. It also demonstrates “micro-migration” (Huber and Blackburn, 2012:83) with event of migration over long interval of time in small groups, instead of large scale movement. In appraisal of scholarly perspectives, Blackburn (2004:39), remarks that although recent studies directed attention to migration legends, which uniformly points toward the north and with the fact that migrants adopting the material culture to their new environment. But, the oral traditions and material culture of the tribes does not transmit memories of migration in the same way. The legends relating extensive journeys, genealogies and shared ancestry are not publicly pronounced; but instead, held quietly and referred when necessary to substantiate.

To this vague theme of treatise, the present researcher adds up saying that though the Tibetan concept may be construed inadequate to prove the validity; the long close existential history of the Adi Libo, Ramo, Bokar with Lamaistic Kamba tribe in Mechuka Sub-Division of West Siang district and Adi Tangams with Membas in Tuting and Gelling of Upper Siang district (Dunbar, 1916), the adaptation of material culture and trade exchanges with Tibetan traders cannot be ignored. And so, it may be surmised that though the Adis (or Tanis) do not share common history of origin; but possibly traces place of original homeland. In verifying the viewpoint, recently in 2017, a Chinese movie entitled “The Soul of Himalaya” portraying and casting Bogar tribe⁴ under the direction of Zeng Yunhui turn out to be much acclaimed and topic of tell-tale among the Tani tribes (mainly among the Adi Bokars). As per the public colloquies, the Bogar tribe (depicted in movie) revealed resemblance with material cultures of the Adi Bokars. Interestingly, it filmed the actors venerating Donyi and Polo for comfort and though a foreign language, the language was conversant to the native audience.

Another local scholar, Otem Pertin (2010:34) contesting the Burma/China hypothesis, advocates that Adi myths and legends claim entry of Adis from Kepäng Bogong (Kepäng La pass) situated in north of Tuting in Upper Siang district. He thus asserts –

“One may be interested to know the reason of tracing (Adi) origin from nothingness (Kéyüm-Kéro). This is not answerable; after all myth is myth, and nobody knows how it happened. However, a simple explanation can be drawn with reference to the tribal worldview. In the worldview of tribal people, a phenomena does not exist in isolation, therefore, to describe the phenomena they start from the beginning of the creation of universe” (ibid, 2010:29).

According to the Padam legend, they entered the present area via Kepäng La pass and settled in Méye Tamté (nearby Gelling in Upper Siang). After few years of staying, the horde further moved southwards to Korbé, Mayüng, Sitüm and Bukrüng and settled down in Salíng Éying (border demarcating Memba, Khamba and Adi areas). Later, they flocked towards Ngürüng Kyodí, Tílné Po:bé and eventually to Bo:né. From Bo:né, the Bomi (Padam) and Bonyöng (Minyong) took different routes of migrations. The Bomi moved to Misum Bopok, Sile Lésing and Kíling Länggé. After settling in Kíling Länggé, they relocated to Gürgür Pegü. In that site, they tussled with Botüng (sub-group of Karko) for possession over Gu:né (wild Mango) and Tayüng Ta:ye to ensnare frogs from Pegü Siéng (Pegu lake). As consequence of dispute, they moved eastwards by crossing Siang river and camped at Dakkong Pígo and Kukpír Pígo. Thereupon, the Megu clan occupied Sikor Korak site and rested at Dengíng Aying (in present Geku Circle). The other clans moved to Baba Sigo and Ané Atkong successively. Towards the east, they further crossed Diräng Adi (a mountain) and settled at Kesíng Kümting adjacent to Yamne River. Meanwhile, the Yiräng clan took settlement at Jokäng. During their itinerary at Kesíng Kümting and Jokäng, the Damro village was occupied by different clans like Leyíng Pa:rak, Nalém Najong, Nalüng Pogäk, and Dängga Noro. At that point, the Léying Pa:rak group killed and devoured the Mithun of Yayi Képäng (ancestor of Pertín, Pérme, Boräng and Ratan clans). Consequently, the other clans of Kesíng Kümting captured and declared them as thieves. However, the Leyíng Pa:rak people fled from the village out of fear. As they vacated the site, then Kesíng Kümting and Jokäng residents established their permanent settlement in Damro village. Thenceforth, Damro is considered as the first Padam village.

In case of Burma/China hypothesis, the premise appears more appropriate to Khampü and Singpho tribes settled in southern stretch. The history of both the tribes reveals Burmese link and proclivity with the Shans of south-western China. For that reason, after the Anglo-Burmese “Treaty of Yandaboo” in 1826, the British regime of Assam mistakenly approved to undertake apostolic “Shan Mission” among the Khamp-

tis and Singphos to reach-out the Shans of Chinese Empire (Assam Baptist Missionary Conference Report, 1911:32). Also, the British accounts of Khampti and Singpho tribes substantiated the details of their migratory history. To exemplify, Waddell (2000:38) noted that the Ching-Pō (Singpho)⁵ in the past centuries pushed the Shans and Burmese to diverse places and occupied the broad strips of mountains stretching from western borders of Yunnan across upper Upper Burma to the Dihing valley at the upper end of Brahmaputra. In addition, Shakespear (2004:161-163) chronicles –

“Along these borders (Upper Burma), the most numerous, powerful, and interesting are, taking them as met with going from Assam eastwards, the Kachins (Chingpaw) and Shans (Tai)...The Shans, or Tai race of Indo Siamese origin at present is the most widespread and numerous in the Indo-Chinese, Peninsula, being found from Assam to Bangkok (Sic.) and well into Chinese Provinces of Yûnnan and Kwangsi, The cradle of this, as with all the races in the Indo-Chinese, is the region of the head waters of the Irrawadi⁶ (River) and other great rivers in the mountainous region of north-eastern Thibet (Sic.)”.

The Tai⁷ race gradually reinforced a strong kingdom between the Upper Irrawadi and Upper Chindwyn, also called Pōng – the capital (ibid, 1914:163). However, before the expansion of Pōng kingdom the Kachins advanced towards Hkamti Lōng driving away the Tai (Shans) and expanded across the Patkai range down the Hukong valley. Pemberton (1835:70) stated that the Khamptis migrated from the eastern hills to acquire permission from the Rajah of Assam (Ahom) to settle in the plains and established themselves on Tenga Pani⁸ near Sadiya.

Conclusion

As per the above deliberated treatise, the analysis of the origin and migration of the Adis from both ends of polarized approaches reflect arbitrary. On one hand, the traditional or mythical approach entails the long established insight of origin and socio-cultural construct engulfed in their worldview; which unquestionably has resilient base of psychic validity and acceptance. It upholds the social integrity and sense of belongingness amongst the different sub-tribes distributed in various geographical spaces. But in contrary, the recent methodical expositions of scholars have attempted to outline and explicate through theoretical insights of the premise. However, although justifiable, both the approaches posit contradictory nuances in their hypothetical outlines and explanations. Nevertheless, none of sides has ever thrived to deliver concrete evidence to verify their claim and validity. Hitherto, the age-old discernment of the natives stands firm and conventional about their mythical root of origin, migration and settlement in

their everyday life.

Endnotes

- 1 Tony Huber, an eminent Tibetologist preferably use the term for Arunachal Pradesh.
- 2 Jido village was first visited by Kinthup and found a bridge over the Yang Sang Chu River. Later on, Captain Bethell of 10th Gurkha Rifles, with Lakhimpur Battalion, Military Police crossed 780 feet tubular cane bridge at Kodak and found 40 houses in the village (Dunbar, 1916:94).
- 3 Interview: Dana Pertin, Siluk Village, 2016.
- 4 Bokar is an Adi sub-tribe of mainly concentrated in Mechuka, Monigong, Pidi and Tato circle of Mechuka Sub-Division in West-Siang District.
- 5 The term “Ching-Põ” was exactly pronounced by both the Assamese and some Burmese sections of the tribe (Waddell, 1901:40), which was rechristened with new anglicised form “Singpho” by the Assamese. Today, they inhabit the hilly outskirts of Patkai ravine (in Lohit and Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh) bordering the Kachin state of Myanmar and Yunnan province of China. Accordingly, they are identified as Singpho in India, Kachin in Burma and Jingphow in China (Machey, 2013:3750).
- 6 The confluence of Mali-kha (in the west) and Nmai-kha (in the east) forms the great Irrawadi River; which is about 150 miles above Myitkhyina in Burma (Shakespeare, 1914:159).
- 7 The Khampti tribe inhabited the upper source of Irrawadi River between eastern Assam and China in the north bordering the Ching-Põ province (Waddell, 1901). At present, majority of the Khamptis reside in Namsai and some few in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh. In Khampti and Singpho dominated areas, they formed a community based institution with the banner – “Tai-Khampti-Singpho” to foster collective solidarity among the same racial groups. The section of Khamptis residing in Assam calls themselves “Tai Shyam” (Waddell, 1901). However, the Khamptis of Arunachal Pradesh considers Shyams as of “lower-status” group, based on their social stature.
- 8 Tenga Pani is a village located in Lathao Circle of Lohit district in Arunachal Pradesh. <http://www.census2011.co.in/data/village/266578-tenga-pani-mukh-arunachal-pradesh.html>

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Institutional	Rs. 500	US \$ 75

Volume 3

Issue 1

ISSN : 2456-8228
January-December 2018

DERA NATUNG GOVERNMENT COLLEGE RESEARCH JOURNAL

Printed and published by Mr. Tao Abo on behalf of Dera Natung Government College. Printed and published from M/s Eastern Horizon Printing Press Bank Tinali, Itanagar, Papum Pare District -791 111, Arunachal Pradesh, Editor Mr. Tao Abo.