

**SOME THOUGHTS ON PROFESSOR SURYYA
KUMAR BHUYAN AS AN EDITOR
OF ASSAMESE BURANJIS**

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Suryya Kumar Bhuyan was a scholar of exceptional abilities and rare brilliance. His range of scholarship was diverse, although history was his true passion. As a child I knew of Professor Suryya Kumar Bhuyan as a friend of my maternal grandfather. Now, as a PhD scholar myself, I am reviewing his various historical works and have drawn inspiration and guidance time and again for my own research project. Professor Bhuyan's unstinting dedication in improving the standard of Assamese scholarship and his efforts in opening up channels of scholarly communications between the west and Assam have been tremendous contributions to Assamese society and culture. His scholarship had many facets and each segment can be discussed at great lengths. Nonetheless, much will remain unsaid. This short essay is a cursory attempt at understanding some elements of Professor Suryya Kumar Bhuyan's contribution to the Assamese historical tradition. The focus will be on his role as an editor of the Assamese buranjis.

When I first started my research in the buranjis of Assam, more than two years ago, I was surprised that so much material is available in published editions. I was no doubt delighted. It made the task of researching the old documents less daunting. However, over and over again I realized that it was only one person who had devoted his life's energy towards collating stray fragments of undecipherable manuscripts in the old Assamese language and with the help and support of a number of eager assistants compiled the materials. They were published under titles such as **Deodhai Assam Buranji**, **Kamrupar Buranji**, **Satsari Assam Buranji**, **Tungkhungiya Buranji**, and so on. The lists of the published buranjis edited by Professor Bhuyan are many. Here, I have to remind the readers that Professor Bhuyan worked only with the Assamese buranjis. The buranjis written in the Ahom language were not integrated to the edited volumes. Personally, I view this strategy as an honest statement of a great scholar who knew his limitations. The Ahom language was not known to him and he did not assume scholarly intuition in knowing it. The task of editing the Ahom language buranjis has been left to other scholars. This project needs to be taken up soon.

As a research scholar in University of Wisconsin-Madison, I translated to English a few of the edited Assamese buranjis, namely the Satsari Assam Buranji and Deodhai Assam Buranji, I found that Professor Bhuyan's method of compilation was simple and well set up. He followed the same methodology in organizing all the edited buranjis. The text is presented in the model of western historical books that is in a linear chronological pattern. Especially, in the case of the Satsari buranji the edited publication is a narrative. This method, no doubt, makes the task of deriving a sequential history of the Ahom Kings of Assam very easy, but in itself it suffers from some problems. By imparting a linear voice to a non-western indigenous source. Professor Bhuyan casted the buranjis in a particular mould. Since then, buranjis have been read by Assamese scholars like a modern history book which is sequence of cause and effects, rather than as text of a people who had a particular perception of the past. Assamese scholars have not attempted to question the complex process of the composition and articulation of the Assamese past through the medium of the text that is the buranji. Professor Bhuyan himself, however, was aware of this problem. He therefore urged in the preface of the Satsari Buranji that an enthusiastic scholar should take up the task of sorting the events and

descriptions available in the seven buranjis and write an interpretative history of the Ahoms from this source.¹

The chronological arrangement of the buranjis in Professor Bhuyan's editions does not mean that the editor attempted to date the text. The buranjis were simply arranged in the chronology of their narration of events and incidents. This method was followed systematically throughout in all publications. In comparing the original manuscripts with the published editions, I have found that Professor Bhuyan's published editions were generally re-productions of the original manuscripts with nearly no changes in the original orthography and syntax. His editions are, therefore, very useful and dependable for research. The published texts each have a title, and thus the presentation is like a modern book. For instance, seven independent buranjis were arranged in a chronological sequence and titled Satsari Assam Buranji. Professor Bhuyan reasons that the seven buranjis form a 'chain made of seven gems' and hence this name. In the case of the Deodhai Assam Buranji or the Tungkhungiya Buranji the same ethnographic imagination is applied. Once again, the method is simple. The title of the published edition is a direct reflection of the main characteristics or actors in the buranji. The Tungkhungiya Buranji as the name implies is the history of the Tungkhungiya family of the Ahom royalty.

The published editions of these buranjis have various paginations. The preface, editors' note and table of content consist of one section and the text of the buranji generally constitutes a separate section. Each chapter has a separate heading and within the chapter sub-titles marks the change of subject or event. Further, each paragraph is numbered. This method is followed throughout in all the buranjis. The continuous numbering of paragraphs enable quick and easy search of reference points on any given subject matter. However, a researcher has to recheck the original manuscript before making citations and understandably in reading the original manuscript one finds folio numbers and not paragraph numbers like in the published version.

Professor Bhuyan was a conscientious editor. He rarely made any assumptions on the authorship or place of composition of the buranjis. In case when the original buranji was signed by the author, he provides us with the name of the person. Such an example is the first buranji in the Satsari collection. Rajmontri Atan Buragohain is said to have commissioned the writing of this buranji. This information is shared with the reader. But one cannot say the same about the authorship of the second buranji of the text. The editor provides us with the name of one Gangadhar Hastakhyaram as the signatory of the text. It is not stated whether Gangadhar was the author or a scribal help who took notes from the narrator of the buranji. Notwithstanding, the anonymity of authorship of many other buranjis, Professor Bhuyan gives sufficient information to the reader describing where and from whom the original buranjis were procured. Often times, he also brought to light the existence of other versions of the same texts. This is a very useful and essential tool of research, especially in doing translation projects or interpretive analysis.

As I have mentioned earlier, Professor, Bhuyan's editions were generally re-productions of the original buranjis. The original prose style is maintained and this becomes particularly obvious when different buranjis following different prose-style have been compiled in one publication. Sometimes, there is no variation in the style of writing, but in the composition of the material. These elements provide important insights to the possible place and context in which the buranjis were written. To elaborate this point let me quote a short passage. 'His son Tyao Suhan succeeded to the throne. Chao Phrang was killed, Khun Tai was imprisoned. In a battle against the Tangsoo Nagas, Chao Kang was captured and taken prisoner. His son Kanon Rak was asked to continue fighting. But he hid himself. For this offence Nan Rak's son was denoted'.² The literary style of this passage is

crisp, colloquial and simple. In contrast, another passage reads like this. ‘On the 20th day of Ahin, Brahmans, including Katyayana, who were residing in the bamboo grove, were expelled and earthen pots were tied around their necks. After 20 days had passed, the relatives of the Phukan were rounded up and put to death. On the 17th day of Kati, the plinth of a huge temple was laid in the hills. After 25 days, the plinth was cemented with stones. In that year, in the month of Haun, there were two floods in the kingdom. The grounds around the stairwell of the Hulong sunk deep into the ground and hence that place came to be known as Haka-Hakini. In 1614 saka, on Sunday, the 13th day of Ahar, the king went to the Lohit River and offered special prayers for long life’.³ It is obvious from this passage that the context is religious, its style is elaborate and steeped in quasi-Sanskrit words. The style of composition of the two passages is apparent. Also, they address different subject matters. The editor retained the original exposition very well in the published versions and thus was able to transmit to the reader the peculiar differences of both the passage.

Besides, maintain original prose-style of the buranjis. Professor Bhuyan maintained the dual dating systems of the manuscripts. The Indian Saka era and the Tai-Ahom Lakli calendar is simultaneously employed to inform the readers of the dates of events.⁴ When the Christian era was occasionally used in the original text, the editor. Professor Bhuyan, provides that date in the published edition. This occurs many times in the Deodhai Buranji, although this not so in the case of the Satsari Buranji.

To sum it, I would like to emphasize that the editorial quality of Professor Bhuyan’s work was superior and his publications were products of thorough, incisive research. His attempt was to produce direct and simple expositions of the original manuscripts and here he did a fine job. Professor Bhuyan’s edited versions should be evaluated for their quality as true re-productions of the original buranjis. They were not critical analysis based on interpretative research. One problem in following the edited publications is the synthetic collation of the diverse materials in the shape of a book. A researcher is often left in the dark about the original manuscript and the reasons why the editor decided to arrange the separate, independent buranjis under one heading. But this problem can be overcome if one reads the preface of the edition and note the name and manuscript number. This then can be double checked in the office of the Director of Historical and Antiquarian Studies of Assam for future reference and research. Barring aside this small problem, Professor Bhuyan’s editing of the vast number of Assamese Buranjis had been one-man’s effort in keeping alive the Assamese historical tradition which had long been neglected and unattended to by scholars before him. In that, Professor Bhuyan’s contribution to Assamese society and culture is unsurpassable and unique.

¹ Satsari Assam Buranji, ed. S.K. Bhuyan (Guwahati, Gauhati University, 1969) p. 12

² Satsari Buranjie, Chronicle 1:36 p.12. The translation to English from the original Assamese is my own. For details see S.Y. Saikia, M.A. Thesis (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1992)

³ Satsari Buranji, Chronicle 111:233, pp 116-117

⁴ Saka : an era reckoned, to have started from the popular, though probably mythical Shaka prince of South India, Shalivahana. The era could have started from Nahapana, of the Shaka satrap or even the Kushana King Kanishka. It commenced in the 78th Year of the Christian year. For instance 1992 A.D., in Saka year will be 1914 saka. (C.H. Philips, Handbook of Oriental History, London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1951), pp. 74, 80.

Lakli : The Tai-Ahoms did not have an era, but computed time by means of a larger Jovian cycle of sixty years, which is called Taosingha. It is sometimes called Aijepi Lakli, after Ajeptyetpha (639-679 A.D), the eldest son of Khun Lai, the mythical king of the Tai-Ahoms. This system we used also by the Chinese, Mongolas, Japanese, etc. Laklis are years in the cycle and each lakli begin from the first day of the ilunar month. Laklis are named and not numbered. A problem of computing time in following this system arises because the Tai-Ahoms recorded the lakli (that is the name of the year) but not the serial number in the Taosingha. It is widely held that Chao Ka Pha, the first leader of the Tai-Ahoms in Assam, entered Assam in the first lakli of the twelfth Taosingha. Since the first cycle of the Tai-Ahoms commences in A.D. 568, the date of the initial Tai-Ahom settlement in Assam works out to be 11 multiplied by 60 plus 568 = 1228 A.D. More research needs to be done before we can accept this date as the base year of Tai-Ahom presence in Assam, (Also see E. Gait, A History of Assam, Calcutta; Thacker Spink and Co. 3rd ed. 1963, Appendix B, pp. 420-421; Deodhai Buranji, pp. xxxix-xliv).

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