

Exploring the Origin of Two Popular Traditional Games in the Ahom Kingdom

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Abstract: *The Ahom dynasty, which ruled the Brahmaputra valley for around six centuries, nurtured a diverse array of traditional games in their culture. These games reflected their martial spirit, river-based lifestyle and agricultural traditions. Among these games, elephant fights ("Haati Juj") and boat racing ("Nao Khel") stood out as prominent examples. While history books documented these popular games during the Ahom rule, still the exact origins of these games remain unclear. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the origin of these two major games (elephant fighting and boat racing) through the literature. The prime objective of the study is to explore the origins and cultural significance of two traditional games, namely, elephant fights ("Haati Juj") and boat racing ("Nao Khel"). Among the most prominent were elephant fights ("Haati Juj") and boat racing ("Nao Khel"). While the origins of these games remain unclear, while their cultural significance endured throughout the Ahom rule. Elephant fights, initiated by Rudra Singha, symbolized royal power and prowess, showcasing control over these majestic creatures. Boat racing, deeply ingrained in Assamese culture, celebrated the maritime tradition of Ahom and adopted unity among diverse communities. Historical accounts and cultural studies illuminate the integral role of these games, intertwining beliefs, customs and principles of amusement within Ahom society. The Ahom rulers invested resources and institutional support to promote these traditions, reflecting their cultural identity and authority. Though evolving over time, elephant fights and boat racing remain enduring symbols of Assamese heritage, symbolizing tales of resilience and cultural richness.*

Key Words: Brahmaputra valley, Buranji, Elephant Fight, Boat Racing, Royal power.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Human species have adapted for numerous of generation developing resilience under the extreme challenging environmental condition. This enduring capability to the formidable world developed essential survival instinct in the human species. The drive for the food and race for the survival obligate human being to move bipedally on the surface of this planet. Walking, running, climbing, jumping was always being considered as the fundamental locomotion for human life. In early stages it was developed for survival activities, later days it also introduced as a competitive form.

The Ahom dynasty, which ruled over the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam for over six centuries (1228-1826 CE), supported and popularized several traditional games and sports. These traditional practices reflected the martial traditions, river-based culture and agricultural roots of Ahom society (Barua, 2003). Many of these games were found in the history book, still studies are being done in order to recover more detailed documentation about those games as a tradition.

One of the most prominent games was "Haati Juj" or elephant fights, which started during the rule of Rudra Singha (1696-1714 CE). "Bulbuli Soraai Juj" or Nightingale fights also gained popularity during Pramatta Singha's reign in the 18th century at the Hajo temple complex (Gogoi, 2020). Animal fights involving other creatures like tigers, bears, boars, crocodiles were also organized within fenced arenas for the entertainment of the royalty and masses (Bhuyan, 1932). Games like "Xen-Kanuar Juj" (Falcon/Hawk fights), Kukura Juj (Cockfights), and "Moh Juj" (Buffalo fights) were equally popular, with the latter believed to aid crop growth (Yeain Chetia, 2012). Wrestling or "Maal Juj" was another major event, with wrestlers coming from other states to participate (Gogoi, 2020).

The Ahoms constructed the Rupahi Pathar field and the Rang Ghar amphitheatre at Rangpur specifically for hosting these events (Neog & Gogoi, n.d.). Water-based games like “Nao Khel” (boat races) were held on the Brahmaputra River, with different types of boats being used based on their size and purpose (Neog & Gogoi, n.d.). Among the common people, games like “Dhup Khel”, “Kori Khel”, “Hoi Gudu Khel”, “Ghila Khel”, “Tang Guti” and “Tekeli Bhonga” were widely played for entertainment and skill development (Gogoi, 2020).

Numerous studies are being done in order to identify these traditional games during the Ahom period, yet the origins of these games remain unknown. This present study will try to uncover the beginnings of some of the major games played during the Ahom rule. This study is delimited to two major games found during Ahom period namely, elephant fight (“Haati Juj”), boat racing (“Nao Khel”). Finding the roots of those mentioned games will help to understand the originality and diverse culture of the Ahom dynasty.

2. OBJECTIVES:

The present study comprises two prime objectives. Firstly, this study aims to trace the origin of the elephant fighting (“Haati Juj”) and boat racing (“Nao Khel”) as these two games were among major games played in the Ahom Kingdom. Secondly, study also intend to find out the cultural significance of these two major games in the society during the Ahom rule.

3. METHOD:

The current study has been done through the literacy survey methods. Traditional historical books 'Buranjis', different historical documents and articles published by various authors has been reviewed as the source for the current study. These sources were collected through visiting institutional library, with the help of various e-books and different offline or online journals.

4. DISCUSSION:

The Elephant Fight (“Haati Juj”):When we traced it back throughout history, elephants have played multifaceted roles in various Asian civilizations, leaving a profound imprint on both mundane affairs and spiritual beliefs. In ancient China, dating back to the Shang Dynasty (1723-1123 BC), elephants were esteemed for their imposing stature and challenging temperament, symbolizing authority and dominance for rulers who could command them effectively (Kistler, 2006). Similarly, in the later Vedic period of India, beginning around 1000 BC, elephants were tamed and became prized assets for warfare, as evidenced by the development of manuals like Gajasastra detailing their training (Trautmann, 2015). Hinduism further sanctified the elephant, with the celestial Airavana being chosen as the divine mount of the god Indra, reinforcing their sacred significance (Trautmann, 2015). In Vietnam, as early as AD 40, the Trung sisters led a rebellion against foreign rule, riding elephants into victorious battles against the Chinese (Trautmann, 2015). The significance of elephants in Thai-Burmese history is very eminent. It's clear that since the thirteenth century, the Thai royal house utilized elephants for single combat (Chutintaranond,2004). Despite their diminishing role in modern warfare, elephants retain cultural significance in Southeast Asia. Festivals like the elephant round-up in Thailand and the Trò Chiêng in Vietnam serve as emotional reminders of their historical importance, showcasing their enduring legacy in shaping regional history (Vietnam Pictorial, 2017).

In the northeastern region of India also elephants played vital roles in both battlefield engagements and transportation in Assam, as indicated by Hiuen Tsang's accounts and the existence of a Royal Elephant Army during Bhaskar Barman's era (Ahmed, 2015). These might be the indication that the use of elephants before the establishment of the Ahom rule. Though elephants were utilized for various purposes before the Ahom's arrival, there's no evidence in the reviewed literature to suggest that elephant duels were practiced as cultural sports prior to that time. Dating back to as early as 200 BC, the Tai people of modern Southern China were recognized as an "elephant-riding nation," with almost every family owning these majestic animals. Elephants played a significant role in the lives of both rulers and common people. During his journey from Yunnan to Bengal, Marco Polo traversed for two weeks through sparsely inhabited terrain "teeming with elephants and other wild beasts" (Oliver,2009). It's important to acknowledge that the Thai people have a rich history and cultural heritage in the Indo-China peninsula. It could be proposed that the inclusion of elephants in sporting activities likely originated from their ancestral lands rather than being introduced to the region before the Ahom period.

The Buranjis clearly document Sukapha's arrival in the Brahmaputra valley accompanied by two elephants— one tusker and a female along with their mahouts. According to Kashinath Tamuli Phukan, it was Rudra Singha, who had started the elephant combat for the first time in his kingdom, making a important chapter in the page of history books.

The elephant stables located in the northern region of Rang Ghar housed a substantial number of elephants, ranging from 200 to 300, specifically for the purpose of engaging in combat. Arrangements were made along the banks

of Dikhow river, where sturdy fences constructed from long bamboo and wood enclosed the stables, ensuring the safety and containment of these majestic creatures. Responsible for the well-being of the elephants were the Hatibaruas, who meticulously tended to their needs. These magnificent animals were nourished with a diet consisting of sticky rice and black pulses, meticulously administered every morning and evening for a duration of approximately three months, with the intention of instigating a heightened state of readiness and aggression in preparation for the impending battles. Prior to the commencement of each skirmish, a bell known as “Gajaghanta” was suspended around the neck of the elephant, serving as a symbolic and practical element in the proceedings. Historical records indicate that the contests took place in two distinct formats - one being conducted in the open field, while the other unfolded within the confines of a specially constructed compound, situated atop a raised mound of soil. The outdoor clashes, referred to as “Melajuj”, offered a spectacle for spectators as the majestic creatures showcased their strength and prowess. In contrast, during the enclosed encounters, the elephants' backs were shielded with ropes crafted from jute, with the mahout assuming control by gripping onto these ropes, steering the colossal beasts during the intense battles. The outcome of these clashes often resulted in the defeated elephant fleeing the scene, occasionally leading to unfortunate fatalities involving both the elephant and its mahout. The symbolic significance of the “Gajaghanta” adorning the elephant's neck served as a poignant reminder to spectators of the inherent risks and consequences associated with such combats. Detailed accounts of the elephant fights that transpired during the Ahom period are chronicled in the “Deodhai Ahom Buranji”, documenting the elaborate rituals and preparations undertaken to facilitate these grand spectacles. The “Hastividyārnavā” is a work on elephant that arose in a matrix of disciplined study, prolonged observation and a precedent tradition. The commission of such a treatise was perhaps considered important as the elephant played an important role in affirming the idea of monarchy and exercising state power (Barua, 2005).

The Boat Racing: The Ahom dynasty, which ruled over the region of present-day Assam from the 13th to the 19th century, played a pivotal role in promoting and institutionalizing the boat racing culture in the region. This tradition had deep roots among the indigenous communities of Assam, such as the Bodos, Kacharis, Chutiyas and the Chutiya kingdom, which had been practicing boat racing for centuries before the Ahom arrival (Barua, 1966; Nath, 1989; Sarma, 2008; Taher, 1993).

History books documented an important incident with the sixth Ahom king, Sutupha. King Sutupha was treacherously killed by Chutiya king while watching boat race on the Safrai river in 1376 A.D. This might be evidence that perhaps the Chutiyas who started the boat race in the Brahmaputra valley before the Ahom Rulers (Rajkumar,2000). The betrayal of the Chutiya Kingdom led to bitter war between Ahoms and Chutiyas in which by 1523 A.D Suhunmung conquered the Chutiyas. The war booty consists of many things, among which a 'hiloi tula sora nau' was found. It is stated in the burajis that this boat was refurbished by Sandikai Borphukan to entertain king Rudra Singha with 'Mogori Sora Nau' game. From this time on this game had started to receive royal patronage in the Ahom era. It had been being held in the Mahgarh area under the supervision of Nauboisa Phukan, starting with the sound of firing of gun. These boat racing events were organized on grand scales, particularly during festivals like Baisagu, which marked the Assamese New Year. Kings like Suhunmung Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) and Sukhampha (1552-1603) actively participated in or presided over these events held on the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries (Gait, 1905; Sharma, 2005). The front part of the boat was adorned like a neck of peacock and the back part was similar to that of duck wings, cutted with images of leaf-flower and coloured with hengul-haital (Saikia,2013). The Ahom rulers encouraged the development of specialized boat-building techniques, providing patronage to skilled craftsmen and rowers (Phukan, 1998). The Nauboisa Phukan post was created to look after the boats under which the below mentioned khel i.e the “paiks” included - Dihingia, Tungkhungia, Charigia, Hezari , Kothonia, Morol and so on. The first three ones had to engage in boat race for the amusement of kings (Borboruah,1997).

The Koch kingdom, which ruled over parts of Assam from the 16th to the 19th century, also promoted boat racing. King Naranarayana (1540-1584) organized grand events during Baisagu and other occasions, reflecting his love for water sports (Neog, 1980; Sarmah, 2010). It's notable to mention that during the same period, boat racing received royal support in Thai-Burmese territories. Particularly in Burma, during the Thingyan water festival, royal barges were prominently displayed. This might have served as inspiration for the Ahom kings in arranging similar events, (Buragohain ,2018).

Cultural Significance: Traditional games and sports acquire its own characteristics according to geographical conditions, natural differences and ethnic traditions. Moreover, games carry not only the bravery, heroism and tactics of the involved party but also reflect the customs and principles used for amusement and pleasure (Saikia,2013).

Likewise, any other components of folk-culture the games may also associate with beliefs and dogmas of a society in one way or another. The relation between Bihu festive and the traditional games of Assam is perpetual. The tradition of Bihu itself is a partial reflection of several thousand years of culture shaping through the ages of primitive and

agriculturalist people in the valley (Saikia,2013). Therefore, the commencement of sport activities in conjunction with Bihu, proof of which can also be found in the 'Buranjis' demonstrate the cultural significance of the games. Elephant fights were often organized during festivals, ceremonies serving as a display of power, prestige and martial prowess. It was a way to demonstrate the strength and control exercised by the royal authority over these majestic creatures, reinforcing their authority. In the same way, boat racing also served as a cherished tradition that encompassed various aspects of Ahom society. It brought together people from different communities and social strata thereby fostering a sense of unity. Boat racing celebrated the maritime tradition of Ahom, highlighting the importance of rivers and water transportation in daily life, trade and most importantly in warfare.

5. CONCLUSION:

The Ahom's rulers during their migration and subsequent settlement in Assam, brought with them their cultural practices, including traditional games, one of which was grandly celebrated elephant fighting or "Hati -Juj". As for the boat racing or "Nao - Khel", it was already rooted among the natives in the valley which holds the dual significance as both as a practical necessity and a cultural expression in Assamese heritage. Further They developed specialized techniques, created official positions and invested resources to promote these activities that reflected their power and cultural identity. Though evolving over time, these traditions remain deeply rooted in the region's cultural fabric as reminders of its own untold rich history.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: There is no potential conflict of interest between the author of this study.

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