



The Sadiya Serpent Pillar Inscription: A Historical and Epigraphic Analysis of the Ahom- Mishmi Relation

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Abstract: The Sadiya Serpent Pillar, an octagonal stone monument inscribed with one of the earliest known Ahom scripts dated to 1532 CE, stands as a significant artefact of the Ahom-Mishmi relationship in the historical region of Sadiya, Assam, India. Erected during the reign of Ahom king Suhungmung Dihingia Raja (1497–1539), the pillar records a treaty between the Ahoms and the Mishmi tribe, outlining territorial and tributary obligations. This paper examines the historical context of the pillar's erection, the content and significance of its inscription, and the broader socio-political dynamics of the Mishmi-Ahom relationship. Drawing on primary sources, including epigraphic records and secondary historical accounts, the study highlights the pillar's role as evidence of diplomatic engagement and mutual coexistence between the Ahoms and the hill tribes of Northeast India.

Introduction:

The Sadiya Serpent Pillar is an octagonal stone monument, approximately 11 feet in height, with a base measuring 15 inches square. Carved on a monolithic stone, the pillar is adorned with a figure of a snake entwined around it. It was discovered by Political Officer of Sadiya in 1921 somewhere 7 miles north of Sadiya on the banks of Deopani River. Additionally, many brick-sided tanks were also found at the site which suggests that this place must have been of some importance in the past and it was ensured that the Pillar inscription was placed in a significant public or ceremonial site. In 1953, it was relocated to the Assam State Museum in Guwahati, where it remains on display.

The Serpent Pillar bears an inscription, written in Ahom script, which is one of the earliest surviving examples of this Tai-based writing system dated to 1532CE. This artifact is not only a testament to the architectural and epigraphic prowess of the Ahom kingdom but also a critical source for understanding the interactions between the Ahoms, a Tai-Shan dynasty that ruled Assam from the 13th to the 19th century, and the Mishmis, an indigenous hill tribe of present-day Arunachal Pradesh. The pillar's inscription, issued by Phrasenmung Borgohain, the first Ahom governor of Sadiya (*Sadiya Khowa Gohain*), records a treaty that formalized the relationship between the Ahoms and the Mishmis following the Ahom annexation of Sadiya in 1524.



The Sadiya Serpent Pillar Inscription

Objective:

This paper aims to provide;

- A comprehensive analysis of the Sadiya Serpent Pillar inscription and its implications for understanding the Mishmi-Ahom relationship.
- It explores the historical context of Sadiya's annexation by the Ahoms and the content of the inscription
- The socio-political dynamics of the treaty, and the long-term impact of this relationship on the region's history.

Research Methodology:

The study adopts a qualitative research designs combining archival research, epigraphic analysis and comparative historical study. The study integrates primary sources analysis with secondary literature to provide comprehensive understanding of the inscription. The primary sources includes the archival records such as The Tour diary of the Political Officer of Sadiya (1924), the Assam Gazetteer (1928), Accounts of the British explorers like S.F. Hannay, T. Block etc. The secondary sources are scholarly works on the history of the Ahoms like J. Das (1980), Laxmi Devi (1992), B.M. Bareh (2001) and others. The study will produce a detailed translation of the inscription and a historical narrative of the Ahom-Mishmi Relation.

Discussion:

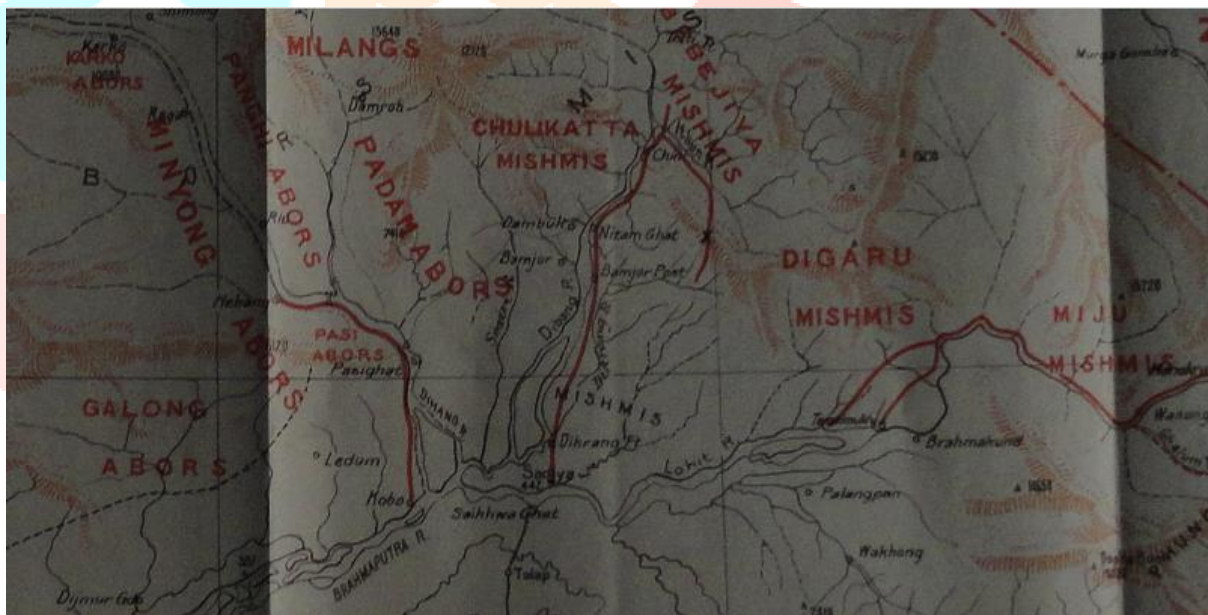
The Ahom kingdom, established in 1228 CE by Sukaphaa, a Tai prince from Yunnan, China, expanded significantly in the Brahmaputra Valley by the 16th century. Under the reign of Suhungmung Dihingia Raja (1497–1539), also known as Swargadeo Suhummong, the Ahoms achieved a pivotal victory by annexing the Chutia kingdom in 1524. The Chutias, a Bodo-Kachari group, had ruled Sadiya, a strategic northeastern frontier region encompassing parts of present-day Tinsukia, Lakhimpur, and Dhemaji districts in Assam. Sadiya's location on the right bank of the Lohit River made it a vital hub for trade and military control, connecting the plains of Assam with the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, including the Mishmi and Adi tribes.

The annexation of Sadiya marked a turning point in Ahom expansion, as it brought them into direct contact with the hill tribes. To administer this frontier, Suhungmung appointed Phrasenmung Borgohain as the Sadiya Khowa Gohain, a governor responsible for maintaining relations with the Mishmi and other tribes. The establishment of this administrative post highlights the Ahoms' recognition of Sadiya's strategic importance and the need for diplomatic engagement with indigenous groups.

The Mishmi Tribe:

The Mishmi, an indigenous group of Tibeto-Burman origin, inhabited the hilly regions of present-day Arunachal Pradesh, particularly along the Dibang and Lohit river valleys. Known for their autonomy and martial traditions, the Mishmi were organized into loosely structured clans and maintained a subsistence economy based on agriculture, hunting, and trade. Their interactions with the plains-based kingdoms, such as the Chutias and later the Ahoms, were shaped by trade, tribute, and occasional conflicts. The Mishmi's control over the hill passes made them significant players in the regional power dynamics, as they could facilitate or disrupt trade routes to Tibet and Burma.

Prior to the Ahom annexation, the Mishmi had coexisted with the Chutias, possibly paying tribute or engaging in barter trade. The transition to Ahom rule necessitated a new framework for interaction, which the Sadiya Serpent Pillar inscription sought to formalize.



Map of the Mishmi Country

The inscription as deciphered by Rai Bahadur Golab Chandra Barua in 1924 reads;

I, the Dihingia Bar Gohain, do engrave on the stone pillar and the copper plate these writings, (with the strength of which) the Mishmis are to dwell on the hills near the Dibong river with their females, children, attendants and followers. They will occupy all the hills. They will give four baskets full of poison and other things as tribute and keep watch on the body of fat Gohain (Sadiya Khowa Gohain). If anybody happens to be in possession of and wishes to remain on all sides (of the hills), he is prohibited from encroachment. If anybody would dwell by the side of the hills, he would surely become a slave (of the Mishmis)

I do proclaim wide if anybody sets exalted (i.e. comes in power, i.e. becomes ruler) he should not break (the agreement) and break the stone.

From above translation it becomes apparently clear that Ahoms rulers wanted to have a peaceful relation with the Mishmis. Conquest of Sadiya in 1524 was followed by a number of Sutiya revolts as they were not ready to reconcile the loss of their independent kingdom. Subsequently, they revolted in 1527 and 1529 which although were crushed by the Ahoms but it resulted in lawlessness and general chaos in the region. Therefore, the Ahom ruler must have felt the urgency to secure the frontier of his newly conquered territory from the hilly tribes. Under these circumstances, the terms of Ahom-Mishmi Relation were engraved on a stone pillar and got erected by Phrasenmung Bargohain (*Dihingia Bargohain*) in c.1532. The stone pillar had since then been a symbol of Ahom-Mishmi amity and cooperation.

Some key features of Sadiya Serpent Pillar Inscription are:

Territorial Allocation: The Mishmi were instructed to dwell on the hills near the Dibang River with their families, children, attendants, and followers.

Tributary Obligations: The Mishmi were required to pay tribute, including “four basketfuls of poison” (likely referring to toxic substances used for hunting i.e. Aconite by Mishmi tribe)’.

Surveillance Role: The Mishmi were tasked with keeping watch over the “body of the fat Gohain” (possibly the Sadiya Khowa Gohain), suggesting a protective or supervisory role.

Prohibitions: The inscription prohibits encroachment on Mishmi territories by others and warns that violators would become “slaves” of the Mishmis. It also emphasizes on the sanctity of the agreement, threatening that those who break it, would be tantamount to the breaking of the stone itself, which would imply challenging the Ahom authority.

The use of the Ahom script, a Tai-derived system, reflects the cultural and administrative influence of the Ahom ruling elite. The inscription’s language and tone suggest a formal declaration intended to assert Ahom authority while acknowledging the Mishmi’s autonomy within defined limits.

Long-Term Dynamics

Throughout the whole history of Ahom rule in Sadiya region after its conquest, we find reference of Ahom-Mishmi conflict only once. It was during the reign of Ramdhvaj Singha in June 1675, when Mishmis killed four Ahom priests in the Ahom territory. Thereafter military expedition was sent under Sadiyakhwa Gohain and Barphukan. The Mishmis surrendered and promised them to make over the murderers. The Sadiyakhwa Gohain realised tribute from some Mishmis which corresponds to the Sadiya Serpent Pillar Inscription although particulars of the tribute is not mentioned in the Buranji. After this incident till the end of the Ahom rule in Assam, the Mishmis did not commit any raid within the Ahom dominion.

The Sadiya Serpent Pillar, as the earliest documented evidence of this relationship, laid the foundation for a framework of amity and cooperation that persisted until the British annexation of Assam in 1826 following the Treaty of Yandabo. The prolonged peace and tranquillity as a product of this agreement between Ahoms and Mishmis have boosted trade between people of hills and plains. The Mishmi-Ahom relationship facilitated socio-cultural exchanges, particularly in trade. The Mishmi traded forest products, such as wax, ivory, and musk, with the Ahoms, who supplied cotton cloth, salt, and metal goods. These exchanges strengthened economic ties and fostered interdependence.

Conclusion

The Sadiya Serpent Pillar and its inscription offer a window into the historical dynamics of the Ahom-Mishmi relationship, highlighting a period of diplomatic engagement and mutual coexistence in 16th-century Northeast India. The uniqueness of this pillar inscription lies in the fact that it reflects the Ahom's pragmatic approach to frontier governance through diplomacy rather than military prowess. The inscription's epigraphic and historical value highlights its importance as a primary source for understanding the region's past. The serpent imagery on the pillar is significant, as serpents hold a prominent place in Northeast Indian folklore and religious traditions. In Ahom culture, serpents were associated with protection, fertility, and divine power, often linked to the worship of ancestral deities. The Ahom-Mishmi relationship, as evidenced by the pillar, was characterized by negotiation, economic exchange, and occasional conflict, laying the foundation for centuries of interaction. The limitation of the study is that the inscription is written solely in the Ahom script which reflects the perspective of the ruling elite, leaving the Mishmi's voice unrecorded. The Mishmi tribe's role as autonomous protagonists who negotiated terms and maintained control over the hills deserves greater recognition. Future research could explore additional archaeological and oral sources to further illuminate the Mishmi perspective and the pillar's role in shaping Northeast India's cultural landscape.

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