



A Study of Biodiversity in the Light of Place Names of Nagaon District

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Abstract

Toponymy, a branch of Onomastics, is the study of the Place Names. The study of place names of any part or region speaks about the detailed interconnectedness between man and nature or environment. The study of place name or Toponymy opened up a new dimension in the study of Biodiversity. Apart from rich water resources Nagaon district has also inherited wild life centres such as part of Kaziranga, Laokhowa etc. Amoni, Koroiani, Nilbagan, Rowmari, Hatichong are example of some place names of Nagaon district which reflect a close connection between Toponymy and Biodiversity. The linguistic analysis of such names will explain about the nomenclature, etymology, specifics, generics etc, which will envisage the richness of bio potentialities in the respective area. These provide ample information to reconstruct the past heritage on bio-diversity and environment. This paper is an attempt to find out the various linguistic, flora, fauna and other influences on the Toponymy of Nagaon District and to find out the rise and fall of these elements on bio-diversity as tools to reconstruct the lost heritage.

Keywords: *Toponymy, Onomastics, Linguistic, Bio-diversity, Flora, Fauna.*

Introduction

Toponymy is a branch of Onomastics. It means the study of the Place Names. The word Toponymy is a combination of two Greek words *Topos* and *Nymy* or *Onoma* which mean 'place' and 'name' respectively. Like Toponymy, Onomastics has other branches, Hydronymy study of names of water bodies, Hodonymy, study of names of roads and ramparts, Anthroponymy, study of personal names etc. With the development of human civilization Toponyms also became one of the basic major features with Oronymy, or any kind of Onomastics. Toponymy is the representation and reflection of basic human knowledge, culture and tradition. From this standpoint, Toponymy marks an important turning point in the history of human civilization.¹

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A place name provides particular direction to a geographical area. Place names have immense importance and one could say that they form a part and parcel of human civilization. Humankind abandoned a wandering life and started to settle permanently in a particular area. They commonly settled in an area and started agriculture and engaged in other modes of their living. To identify their area of settlement, people began using a particular name to designate their localities taking into account some of its characteristics. So, the place name can provide not only the history of the place but also provide other related information regarding it such as social, political, economic and even more bio-diversity.

Place names are normally used as the indicator of places. Place names reflect variety of objects, both natural and man-made, such as huts, fields, streets, temples, villages, towns, rivers, tanks, hills, mountains, forests, regions, countries and others which come under purview of human knowledge. Place names of a region speak about the geographical peculiarities and historical or cultural endowments of a people. Place names disclose the pages of vast knowledge, interest and wonder not only for a keen observer of nature but to the laymen also. This has no barrier of dialect, region and time.ⁱⁱ

A few aspects of biodiversity can be established from the study of place name, i.e., Toponymy. This is a new element to the study of biodiversity. Biodiversity provides the basic essentialities, namely, food, shelter, fuel, fodder, biomass etc. for the survival of mankind as well as the entire bio-kingdom. As one of the resource-ecosystems of the environment, it provides basic raw materials, which are primary infrastructure and basic requirement for any economic and other income generating activities. Biodiversity, as a functional element and constituent helps to maintain the chemical balance of the earth, biophysical system and stabilize climate. It is above all, a life support system. Thus, bio-diversity deserves to be conserved in its total form and complete existence within environment.ⁱⁱⁱ As one look into any part of the world one can see certain category of place names is an indicator of bio-diversity. The linguistics analysis of such names will explain about the nomenclature, etymology, specifics, generics etc., which will visualize the richness of bio potentialities of the said area. Toponymy is one of the important tools to reconstruct the past be it bio diversity, history, geography, culture and so on. Therefore, no one can deny the interrelation between toponymy and bio diversity. With the growth of human civilization, man being close to the nature, observes whatever from nature and identify and rationalize intimately. So, for identifications of any object they named from the natural features, like river, hill or mountain, plateau, colour of water and soil, natural vegetations, fauna and so on. That is why in respect to toponymy bio-diversity became an important component of it.

At the centre of Assam, on the southern bank of the mighty river, Brahmaputra, the Nagaon district is situated. It is included in the Swarnapith^{iv} of ancient Assam. In ancient times the district was known as 'Khagarijaan'. In the early phase of the Colonial rule, the southern bank of Brahmaputra was known as 'Nowgong' which is the Anglicized form of present Nagaon. The Nagaon district has an area of 4435.3 square kilometers. The boundary of Nagaon district is formed by the Brahmaputra to the north, Karbi Anglong district and a small portion of Meghalaya to the south, Sibsagar district and Karbi Anglong district to the

east, and to the west lies the Kamrupa district and Meghalaya. Among the rivers the Brahmaputra is the principal river. Apart from rich water resources Nagaon district has also inherited wild life centers such as part of Kaziranga, Laokhowa etc.

Objective and Methodology

The primary objective of this paper is to examine the bio-diversity such as flora, fauna and environment as reflected in the toponyms of Nagaon district. It is also an attempt to find out new information related to habitation pattern of Austric, Kirata, Tai, Bodo, Dimasa and other tribes and their settlement in Nagaon district which influence the place names. Another objective of this paper is to highlight the gradual decline in biodiversity which is found to occupy a foremost place as a component of several place names of this region.

The methodology adopted for the study is multi-disciplinary. For a study of the Toponyms an interpretative analysis has been made in corroboration with the existing data. For an etymological understanding of the place names, morphological and traditional semantic study has been carried out.

As regards the area of study, it could be mentioned that the Nagaon district comprised of three sub-divisions, ten revenue circles thirty eight *mouzas* and one thousand four hundred and twenty villages. This paper mainly deals with the village, *mouza* or circle names which bears the component of biodiversity. Keeping in view the constraints of time and space a few number of place names have been taken up for study.

Discussion

Naming process or nomenclature of places can easily be treated as indicator of past biodiversity of any area. The study on the origin of the place name speaks about the presence of a particular species in that area which influence the naming process. It is apparent that ethnic groups or inhabitant of the particular area named their place after its features. Nagaon district is also inhabited by various ethnic groups such as Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Tiwa etc. Apart from the plain community these ethnic groups named their places which bears element from biodiversity. One can cite here some examples of this category.

Hayangthal is a place name in Nagaon district. The word *Hayang* originates from another Karbi word *HaiArong*. Karbi *HaiArong* refers to 'saal' tree (Sc. Name- *Shorea robusta*). *Hayang* is derived from *HaiArong* and the Assamese suffix *thal* is semantically equivalent to the Karbi word *athoi*. Both *athoi* (in Karbi) and *thal* (in Assamese) mean a plain area. Therefore, the word *Hayangthal* is a compound formation from Assamese and Karbi language elements.

Akchek Gaon is a revenue village situated to the south east of Dobaka and is about 22 k.m. away from Hojai town. *Akchek* is a Karbi word. In Karbi *Ak* means 'fish' and *Chek* means 'bamboo'. Earlier Karbi people dwelt in this area. Fish and bamboo were abundantly found here so the Karbis named this village Akchek.

Masaga is a revenue village situated to the east of Lanka and is about 3 k.m. away from Lanka town. *Masaga* is a Dimasa word where *Mas* means ‘Deer’ and *Ga* means ‘to climb’. Masaga means a high land where deers need to climb.

Kaki is a revenue *mouza* and growth centre under Lanka revenue circle situated to the east of Lanka about 20 k.m. and 70 k.m. away from Lanka and Nagaon town respectively. The nomenclature of Kaki is influenced by the tribal languages. According to one view the word *Kaki* comes from the Karbi word *Kakei*. *Kakei* means ‘a kind of fish’ which is called *Kaoui* in Assamese (Sc. Name—*Anabustestudineus*). In earlier times a stream flew through the south-east of Kaki where *Kakei* or *Kaoui* fish was available in abundance. So, the Karbis called this stream as *KakeiJaan*. In course of time this *KakeiJaan* was Aryanized as *Kaki Jaan* and further shortened to *Kaki*. From the name of this stream called Kaki, the place got its present name.

Teralangso is a revenue village situated to the east of Lanka and about 23-25 k.m. away from Lanka town. *Teralangso* is a Karbi word. Karbi *Tara* means ‘a kind of reed’ (Sc. Name— *Alpinia allughas*) and *Langso* means ‘rivulet’. The bank of this rivulet was filled with *Tara* so the place was called Taralangso. In course of time, the name Taralangso changed to Teralangso.

Khring Khring is a revenue village situated to the west of Lumding about 16 k.m. away from Lanka town. *KhringKhring* is a Karbi word. The word *KhringKhring* comes from another Karbi word *KhrengKhreng*. The Karbis refer to a particular tree as *KhrengKhreng*. There is a rivulet which flows from the *Larap* hill of Kaki forest towards the south-west of Kaki and subsequently merges with the river Dimarua. On the bank of this rivulet the Karbi *KhrengKhreng* tree was found in abundance which made this tribe confer an eponymous name upon the surrounding area. The name *KhrengKhreng* subsequently changed as KhringKhring.

Jarang Disa is a revenue village situated to the north west of Lumding and is about 4 k.m. away from Lumding town. *JarangDisa* is a Dimasa-Kachari word. The word *Jarang* comes from another Dimasa word *Jaram*. *Jaram* in Dimasa is a kind of tree which normally grows on the bank of a river or stream. As this *Jaram* tree is found in abundance on the bank of this stream so people started to call this stream as ‘JaramDisa’. In Dimasa *Disa* means ‘water’ or ‘stream’ or ‘a small rivulet’.

Apart from the tribal elements signifying biodiversity in place names, one can see the abundant existence of flora and fauna elements behind the nomenclature of places in Nagaon district. The etymological analysis of some place names depicts a strong presence of different flora and fauna names suggesting the rich biodiversity of the region. A majority of such place names have suffixes like *ani* or *oni* and prefixes like *guri*, *habi*, *tol* etc. A study of the following place names could serve to substantiate this stance.

Kaliabor, a sub division is also a revenue circle and a *mouza* in Nagaon district. Kaliabor is an NIA Assamese word. In Assamese *Kalia* means black and *bor* refers to Banyan tree (Sc. Name – *Ficus benghalensis*). So, Kaliabor means a black banyan tree. Hence the toponymy Kaliabor is categorized under a flora origin name.

Misa Mukh, a revenue village is situated to the west of Kaliabor about 5 k.m. away from Barbhogia. The word *Misa* comes from the Bodo word *Moi-Chana*. The Bodo word *Moi-Chana* means ‘a place where deer is caught by trapping in a net’. The suffix *mukh* means a surrounding area or mouth of the river. Thus the toponymy of MisaMukh reveals its derivation from the Bodo language. Prior to human settlement, this area was covered with dense jungle and deer was also commonly found.

Sakmuthi, a revenue village is situated to the east of Kaliabor. *Sakmuthi* is an NIA Assamese word. In Assamese *Sak* refers to a leafy vegetable and *muthi* means ‘bundle’. *Sakmuthi* therefore means a bunch of leafy vegetable.

Pahukota is situated to the west of Samaguri on the southern bank of the river Kalong and to the east of Nagaon town. *Pahukota* is an NIA Assamese word. *Pahu* in Assamese means ‘deer’ (Sc. Name— *Deer sps*) and the suffix *kota* (as verb) means ‘to kill’. *Pahukota* means a place where *pahu* (deer) were killed.

Samaguri is a revenue circle in Nagaon district. *Samaguri* is an NIA Assamese word. In Assamese *Sama* refers to a particular species of tree (Sc. Name—*Artocarpuschaplasha*) and the suffix *guri* means ‘surrounding’. *Samaguri* therefore would imply the surrounding of *Sama* tree. There are so many place names originated from botanical names and these are Kadamani (Sc. Name—*Anthocephalus kodomba*), Kathalguri Mikir Gaon (Sc. Name—*Autorcarpus heterophylus*), Bheleuguri (Sc. Name—*Tetrameles nudiflora*), Karoiani (Sc. Name—*Albezzia procera*), Kadamani (Sc. Name—*Anthocephalus kodomba*).

Padumani, a revenue village is an NIA Assamese word. Assamese *Padum*, Sanskrit *Padma* means ‘lotus’ (Sc. Name—*Nelumbo sp.*) and the suffix *Ani* means ‘a constellation’ or ‘abundance’. *Padumani* means abundance or plenty of *padum* or lotus. This area was marshy and *padum* or lotus bloomed here in abundance. So the marsh came to be known as *Padumani* and it is after the name of this marsh that the village got its name. *Padumani* thus can be categorized as a flora origin name. There are some other place names which also bear similar meaning with *Padumoni*.

Dwar Salna is a revenue *mouza* and the word *Salna* is an NIA Assamese word where *Sal* is ‘a kind of tree’ (Sc. Name— *Shorea robusta*) and the suffix *Oni* means ‘abundance or plenty’. Due to the abundance of *Sal* tree the place came to be known as *Saloni* or *Salna*.

Kachajuri is an NIA Assamese word. The name of the stream ‘Kachajuri’ semantically changed to be a place or village name. In the Assamese language *Kacha* means

‘tortoise’ (Sc. Name— *Geochelone elegans*) and *Juri* means ‘stream’. The stream was famous for the abundance of tortoise and from this feature the place was known as Kachajuri.

Amoni is an NIA Assamese word where *Aam* means ‘mango’ (Sc. Name—*Mangifera indica*) and the suffix *Oni* means ‘constellation’ or ‘abundance’. In earlier times this place was famous for abundance of mangoes and so the place came to be known as Amoni. Now except for the name, *Aam* or mango trees are no longer found in abundance.

Amlakhi Gaon is an NIA Assamese word. The Assamese word *Amlakhi* and Skt. *Amlakhi* is a kind sour fruit (Sc. Name—*Phyllanthus emblica*). Due to the abundance of Amlakhi the place came to be known as AmlakhiGaon (*Gaon* refers to ‘village’). Sometimes the botanical place names are with single nouns without any suffix or prefix like Kadam, Marua, Amlakhi etc. There is yet another place name Ouona, which is in Assamese, *Ou* (Sc. Name—*Dillenia indica*) is a kind of sour fruit and the suffix *ona* or *oni* means ‘constellation’ or ‘abundance’.

The revenue *mouza* Laokhowa is an NIA Assamese word. In Assamese *Lao* means ‘gourd’, a large fleshy vegetable’ (Sc. Name—*Legenaria vulgaris*) and the suffix *khowa* means ‘to eat’. In earlier times *Lao* or ‘gourd’ was found in abundance in this place and so people called this place as Laokhowa. Kumurakota (a kind of ‘gourd’; Sc. Name—*Benincasa hispida*).

Hatichung is a revenue *mouza* in Nagaon district. *Hatichung* is an NIA Assamese word, which as the name implies is a habitat of the elephants. In Assamese, *hati* means ‘elephant’ (Sc. Name—*Elephus maximus*) and *chung* means ‘cave’. The area was originally covered by dense forest, where *hati* or elephants were found in abundance. Hatichung thus refers to an area dominated by elephants. In the medieval period, Hatichung was an important habitat of the elephants. Another place name is HatigarhGaon, which denotes similar meaning. The word Hatipukhuri also comes from elephant.

Raidongia, situated to the north of Nagaon is about 10 k.m. away from the district headquarter. The word *Raidongia* comes from the word *Raidang*. In Assamese *Raidang* is a kind of reed or cane (Sc. Name—*Calamus erectus*).

Kachamari is a revenue *mouza* under Nagaon sub-division. It is situated on the southern bank of the river Sonai and in the north western part of Nagaon town. *Kachamari* is an NIA Assamese word. In Assamese *Kacha* means ‘tortoise’ (Sc. Name— *Geochelone elegans*) and *Mari* comes from the OIA Sanskrit word *Maron* (*mari*) which means ‘to kill’ or ‘beat’ or ‘to shoot’. Here *Mari* as suffix could also mean ‘plenty’ or ‘abundance’. One could find lots of place in Nagaon district bearing their nomenclature from Pisces. For example place names like Rowmari (*Row* fish Sc. Name— *Labeo rohita*), Kandhulimari (Kandhuli fish (Sc. Name—*Notopterus notopterus*), Besamari (*Besa* or *Basa* Sc. Name— *Colisa sota*).

PatiaPathar is a revenue village situated to the north east of Dhing town and is about 12 k.m. away from it. *PatiaPathar* is an NIA Assamese word. The word *Patia* is used to designate a *khel* of the Ahoms. During the Ahom administration the *khels* were entrusted with some kind of special duty. The *Patia Khel* was required to prepare carpet from a special kind of reed which is known as *PatiDoi* in local language (Sc. Name—*Schumannianthus dichotoma*). In Assamese *Pathar* means ‘field’ or ‘paddy ground’. Earlier people of *PatiaKhel* inhabited this open area (*Pathar*) and from their settlement the place came to be known as PatiaPathar.

Tetelisara is a revenue village under Kampurmouza situated on the bank of the river Haria and about 24 k.m. away from Kampur town. Tetelisara suggests a name of flora origin. Tamarind is known as *Teleli* in Assamese. *Teteli* or tamarind is a kind of sour fruit (Sc. Name—*Temarindus indica*).

Ghilani is a revenue village situated on the bank of the river Kapili about 28 k.m. away from Nagaon town. *Ghilani* is an NIA Assamese word. *Ghila* or *Ghilla* is a kind of creeper (Sc. Name—*Oroxylum indicum Vent*) and the suffix *Anior Oni* means constellation. The constellations or collections of Ghilla are known as Ghilani.

Sagunbahi is a revenue village situated in the north east of Kathiatolimouza and is about 27 k.m. away from Nagaon town. Sagunbahi is the name of a village and also the name of a tea garden. *Sagunbahi* is an NIA Assamese word. The Assamese words *sagun* and *bahi* come respectively from the OIA Skt. nouns *sakun* meaning ‘vulture’ (Sc. Name—*Gyps indicus*) and *vash* meaning ‘a nest or shelter’. *Sagunbahi* therefore denotes a place popular for nests of vultures.

Phulaguri is a revenue village situated to the west of Nagaon district and is about 15-17 k.m. away from Nagaon town. The name Phulaguri is derived from the word *Phul*. *Phul* means flower and the suffix *Guri* means the surrounding area. The word *Phulaguri* therefore denotes a place where flowers are found in abundance.

Ghahigaon is a revenue village situated to the south of Nagaon town and on the western bank of the river Kalong. *Ghahigaon* is an NIA Assamese word. The word *Ghahi* comes from the Assamese word *ghah* means ‘grass’ (cattle feed). This area comprises of several *beels* (marshes). The grass which is used for cattle feed is mostly produced in these *beels*.

Jarabari is a revenue *mouza* partly under Kampur and partly under Raha revenue circle in Nagaon district. It situated to the south of Nagaon town and Raha town. *Jarabari* is an NIA Assamese word. In Assamese *Jara* is a kind of large sized lemon which is a sour fruit (Sc. Name—*Citrus medica*). In Assamese suffix *Bari* means ‘garden’ or ‘an enclosure’. *Jarabari* means an area known for *Jara* fruit.

SingariBasti is a revenue village situated on the bank of the Maina *Para beel* (marsh) and to the south-west of Hojai and about 4 k.m. from Hojai town. *SingariBasti* is an NIA Assamese word. The name *SingariBasti* is associated with a word of flora origin. The word *Singari* comes from the Assamese word *Singari*— an aquatic plant (Sc. Name—*Trapa natans*) and *Basti* means a residential area. Earlier in the Maina *Para beel*, *Singari* was found in abundance and so the nearby area came to be known as SingariBasti.

Kapahbari is a revenue *mouza* under Dobaka revenue circle. It is situated to the north east of Dobaka and is about 10 k.m. away from Hojai town. Kapahbari is a vast *mouza* constituted by 33 villages. *Kapahbari* is an NIA Assamese word. The Assamese word *Kapah* and Skt. *Karpas* mean ‘cotton’ (Sc. Name—*Gossypium hirsutum*) and suffix *bari* means ‘a garden or a compound’.

Nilbagan is a revenue village situated to the south of Dobaka and is about 5 k.m. away from Dobaka town. *Nilbagan* is an NIA Assamese word. Assamese *Nil* refers to ‘indigo’ (Sc. Name—*Baptisia tinctoria*) and *Bagan* means ‘garden’. Nilbagan means Indigo garden.

Conclusion

In this study the nomenclature of various places of Nagaon district is discussed. The study depicts that the toponymy of Nagaon district is influenced by various elements of flora, fauna and other features showcasing the biodiversity of the region.

The place names of Nagaon district display sufficient elements of biodiversity. Some place names of Nagaon district are of botanical or flora origin. A good number of place names of Nagaon are prefixed with plant names like *Bor* (Banyan), *Kadam* (a kind of tree) and the like. The suffixes like *Guri* (surrounding), *Bari* (Compound), *Oni* or *Ani* (Constellation), *Bagan* (Garden) and others are the common features attached to the place names of flora origin. Some place names found to be associated with the flora of the region are *Kaliabor*, *Sakmuthi*, *Ouona*, *Padumoni*, *Amoni*, *Amlaki Gaon*, *Laokhowa*, *Batadrava*, *Kadamoni*, *Kathalguri*, *Jamuguri*, *Tetelisara*, *Jarabari*, *Kumurakota*, *Raikota*, *Raidongia*, *JamuHandal*, *Kapahbari*, *Nilbagan*, *Teralangso*, *KhringKhring*, *Phulaguri* etc. Similarly, there are some other place names which are of fauna origin. Prefixes like *Kota* (to kill), *Mari* (plenty) etc. are commonly used in the place names of fauna origin. These are *MisaMukh*, *Pahukota*, *Kachajuri*, *Rowmari*, *Hatichung*, *Sagunbahi*, *AkchekGaon*, *Kaki* etc.

A study of place names of flora and fauna origin in Nagaon district also indicates the loss of biodiversity, that is, loss of various animal and plant species. These Toponyms simply bear the heyday of the past. Today the entire biodiversity scenario has changed. A significant depletion in animal and plant species is prominent in present times. Depletion of this kind has a sweeping effect on nature.

Out of the total, more than fifty percent species of this biodiversity zone as discussed is on the verge of extinction. The place names are only testimonials of their one time existence, in the past. The study shows that toponymy or study of place names could throw

light on the ecological condition of a place highlighting the presence of different plant and animal species along with their status in a particular period of time.

Endnote

- ⁱSarat Kumar Phukan, *Hydronymy of Assam*, Students' stores, Gawahati, 2003, p.28.
ⁱⁱRaghupati Kmtur, "A Few Interesting Place Names of Tulunadu", *Studies in Indian Place Names*, Vol. I, Madhav N. Katti(ed.) Geetha Book House, Mysore, 1980, p.49.
ⁱⁱⁱSarat Kumar Phukan, *Onomastics Assam*, Students' Store, Guwahati, 2004, pp. 145-146.
^{iv} Edward Gait, *A History Of Assam*, Third Edition, Lawyers Book Stall, Gauhati, 1984, p.11.

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