



**Place Names in the Legend of Dodan: An Exploration of the
Interconnectedness of Land and Its Stories in the Rabha Oral Tradition**

Chaitali Gorai

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Tripura University.
chaiti.31@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5825-0297>

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Abstract:

The legend of Dodan holds a significant importance in the oral tradition of the Rabhas of Assam. As part of Rabha oral history, it recounts the tribe's journey through the plains of western lower Assam and their eventual settlement in present-day Goalpara, extending to the edges of the West Garo Hills. Many of the locations associated with Dodan's journey are familiar to other tribes in the region, particularly where challenges were faced in protecting his people from raids. By linking place names to the coup de Dodan, the Rabhas assert their deep-rooted connections to the land they now call home in Assam. This paper examines the migration route that Dodan likely took to reach Goalpara, based on the historical place names mentioned in the legend. Additionally, it explores the anecdotes behind the new place names that emerged over time as storytellers remembered and freely adapted or improvised this legendary tale.

Keywords: Rabha, oral tradition, legend, collective memory, settlement(s).

Introduction

Among the Rabhas of Goalpara,¹ Assam, one often hears about Dodan, a real-life hero from the past.² This legend is remarkable for not only how stories and anecdotes interweave to create a compelling narrative of a brave warrior who through great resilience in the face of considerable odds led his people to safety during the early days of their efforts to settle in western lower Assam, but also for the ways landscape and the stories revolving around the travels and exploits of Dodan become interconnected. The landscape in the legend of Dodan is not merely a backdrop for the Rabha storytellers but a memory that lives on in the collective imagination of the community whose ancestors had once followed Dodan to the region where they are now settled. From the time of Dodan's appointment as the army general of King Bana, or Banasura, of Sonitpur to his death at the place where there is today a lake called Fedar Doba, the legend unfolds across what the storytellers describe as a journey through both familiar and unknown terrains, which posed challenges that were not only confined to the terrain but also brought in raids by and battles with other tribes. The routes the Rabhas travelled and the places they tried to settle as they journeyed with Dodan to lower Assam are not just minor details in the story of this legendary hero; they are interesting details, albeit brief, that poignantly capture the long struggles and the aspirations of people seeking a peaceful place to settle and call their own. Several place names mentioned in this legend are well-known in Assam today. Some retain the original names or those that existed before the Rabhas arrived, while others, which evolved after their arrival, attest to the adoption of new or modified names through association with Dodan and his extraordinary feats.

In the absence of written records of the early history of the Rabha people, the orally transmitted legend of Dodan is a fitting and powerful testament to their collective memory,

particularly in recounting the Rabhas' journey through various places in western lower Assam, extending into the bordering regions of the West Garo Hills. The present paper will focus on the place names mentioned in the legend and examine their interconnections with the various stories and anecdotes associated with Dodan's life and heroic exploits. An attempt will also be made to discover how knowledge of locations has helped the Rabhas shape their cultural identity and construct their oral history.

Previous studies and the present paper

Storytellers and retellers have variously recounted the legend of the Rabha hero, Dodan. While written materials are few, they nonetheless offer valuable insights into Dodan's character and his importance within Rabha folk tradition and oral history. In 'Jatīya Bīr — Dodan' (385-352), Bimalendu Majumder retells the version he learned from his consultant, Mani Rabha. This rendition is particularly noteworthy for tracing the origins of two major Rabha festivals: 'Dodan Baikho' and 'Khakchi' (176-184). A folk song, popularly known as 'Hai-Marū,' is sung during 'Baikho' to honour Dodan and his loyal army general Maru Khetri.³ In another version of the Dodan legend, 'Satī Dumukchi' (37-40), Rajendra Nath Rabha primarily focuses on the relationship between Dodan and Dumukchi, the daughter of a sage, whom Dodan came to love deeply.

The author of this paper had the privilege of exploring the Dodan legend during her stay at Rongsai, Goalpara, in the winter of 2012. Her host, Charu Mohan Rabha, kindly shared useful insights into the legend of Dodan and also told several lesser-known stories and anecdotes related to the legendary Rabha hero. A series of inquiries also helped her gain a better understanding of Dodan's enduring legacy. Later, encouraged by Charu Mohan Rabha, she wrote a brief article for a 2020 souvenir titled 'A Tale Spun Round Real Places: The Lingering Foot-

Prints of Dodan' (134-139), in which she traced the possible routes the Rabhas took as they followed Dodan.

The focus of the present paper has already been mentioned, and repetition would be unnecessary at this point. The first of the two sections that follow discusses place names as it traces the tribe's journey through western lower Assam, following Dodan. Interestingly, the tribes dwelling in these areas had already named them before the arrival of the Rabhas. The second section is devoted to place names associated with events in Dodan's life and his encounters. Some of these names are old or pre-existing, while others have been modified or adapted following their association with Dodan.

Place names associated with the journey of Dodan

The legend of Dodan says that he first led his men through a land already conquered by other tribes, thereby indicating that the places the Rabhas travelled through in the early part of their journey had pre-existing names. The hills and valleys, rivers and forests, as well as villages mentioned early in the legend — many of which are now small towns — are mostly familiar locations in Assam, along the northern fringe of present-day Meghalaya. In the variant tellings of the early part of his journey, only a few place names change, while most remain the same.

Early in the legend, it is said that Dodan served as the army general for King Bana, or Banasura, of Sonitpur in the ancient kingdom of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa (Majumder 349),⁴ situated to the north of the Lohit or Brahmaputra River, which the Rabhas often refer to as the Dhapa River. However, after King Banasura surrendered to Lord Krishna in battle, Dodan gathered a loyal following and left Sonitpur. They first rested in Sonapur, then crossed the Dhapa River on plantain rafts, and arrived at Mayong on the southern bank.⁵ From there, they moved further west to settle at Boko. However, in the Baghmela Hills, they suffered continual

harassment from tigers, or perhaps by a race of tiger-men, and they were compelled to disperse once again. Afterwards, they stayed in Dhupdhara for a while before moving on to Athiyabari, located to the southeast of Rangjuli. Despite their painstaking efforts to cultivate crops there, the soil remained unyielding to their hard work.

Driven by the desire to find a land where they could live in peace and grow crops successfully, they journeyed even further west. Eventually, Dodan established himself at Pankintri, near Baida,⁶ with Rabhagiri as the capital of his new realm, which is said to have extended as far as Tura in the West Garo Hills. Maru Khetri, his army general, had built an invincible fort in Tikrikilla.⁷ Most of the significant events in Dodan's life took place in the hills of Hatisila, Darmang,⁸ and Rongsai. Although there are no documented records or archaeological evidence to support the accounts Rabha storytellers provide, it is believed that Dodan expanded his kingdom over a vast territory, which, by hearsay, stretched from Pankintri along the banks of the Rongsai River to the Darmang hills.

Additionally, several names in the legend evoke images of hilly terrain strewn with rocks and boulders, fringed by forests and murmuring brooks, primarily linked to the coup de Dodan. In the encounters his men had with the tigers or the infamous tiger-men (as they are also recollected in the Garo oral tradition), there is mention of the Baghmela Pahar, a Bengali rendering of the Garo place name Matchamelaram, where *matcha* means 'tiger' (Playfair 11).⁹ This place is said to have been inhabited by the tiger-men, who feasted on human flesh. Literally, the names Baghmela and Matchamelaram could refer to a territory overrun by tigers or to a site of conflict between the Rabhas and the tribes inhabiting the area.¹⁰ According to the Dodan legend, the Rabhas suffered greatly: many were killed, while those who survived fled west to Dhupdhara and Athiyabari. This region, located near Kachari Duar or the Eastern Duar, was

infamous for its unhealthy conditions, due to malaria on the one hand and troubles caused by the Bhutias on the other (Endle 8; M'Cosh 89; Endle *Bootan* 9).

Today, the Rongjuli forest conceals the place. In the Rabha language, *rong* means 'stone' and *juli* refers to a rivulet in Assamese (Phukan 243; 245). Interestingly, several tributaries of the Brahmaputra flow into this region, rich in sal and teak trees. Although the place was peaceful, the acidic, reddish-brown soil there yielded no crops, and the high iron content in the water caused unforeseen problems, leading to many deaths from illness. Eventually, Dodan had to lead his people to Pankintri, where the environment was more ideal and less competitive. There, he ruled peacefully for many years, caring for his subjects and levying no taxes. Then, sometime before establishing himself at Tura, Dodan had likely explored the Simsang (Someswari) river, journeyed to the hills of Nokrek and ventured further east to the hills of Balpakram, while also reaching Adugiri on the west bank of the river. He also followed the Jinjiram River, later arriving at Lakhipur before moving to Baida.

Place names connected to the coup de Dodan

Among the place names Rabha storytellers mention while recounting the heroic exploits of Dodan, some, such as Hatisila, Jurgang (or present-day Jurigaon), and Fedar Doba, are pre-existing. In contrast, others, like Dodan Hill, Chichari-Chimandi, and Dodandubi (or Dodan beel), are newly created or modified.

In one incident at Hatisila in the Goalpara district, a herd of elephants muddied the water where Dodan's sisters, Champaimari and Tobourani, were bathing. When Dodan was told about it, he chased the herd, and in one powerful strike of his sword, he beheaded all the tuskers. The Rabhas believe that a large elephant-like rock found there is the same *hati* 'elephant' that transformed into *sila* or 'a large rock.' On another occasion, while Dodan was offering prayers of

gratitude to Lord Shiva at a temple he had built on Dodan Hill, also in Goalpara, a wild elephant caused trouble. That infuriated him, and with the incredible strength he possessed, Dodan is said to have pushed the elephant, sending it rolling down to the bank of the Dariduri or Dari River, where it transformed into a large, heavy rock.

Several place names appear in the Dodan-Dumukchi episode of the legend. Dumukchi, whom Rabha storytellers claim is an earthly incarnation of a divine maiden named Chikchi, was born at Jurgang, now known as Jurigaon. Dodan was destined to meet her in the woods near Chichari-Chimandi, where a fountain with crystal-clear water gushed forth. Captivated by her outstanding beauty, he sought her hand in marriage, but she refused, much to his frustration. In a fit of anger, he cursed her, and the curse caused a goat to devour her hair, leaving her without beauty.¹¹ As for Dodan, it is said that he was so heartbroken that he ignored his hunger and thirst, eventually fainting with his hands outspread by a small pool called Fedar Doba. He died there without regaining consciousness, and the weight of his heavy body transformed the pool into a lake that now resembles the shape of a man. Soon after, Dumukchi also died and turned into a rock, now known as Magho Balachari, on the Hatisila hill (Goalpara). Some also believe that she was transformed into a rock when she drowned herself in the Jinari River.¹²

Since various versions of the episodes with the legend exist, one finds the mention of other place names in connection with Dodan's death at Fedar Doba. Some link his death to an event following the killing of two of the several soldiers Dumukchi's brothers sent against him. It is said that a third soldier, who was hiding behind a rock in Chiponsila, shot Dodan with a poisoned arrow that struck his knee, leading to his death. The site, known as Sepon sila or Chiponsila, is located near Bamundanga, about 60 kilometres north of Maladora, and was once notorious for conflicts with local, mostly Bhutanese chiefs, who are referred to as Chipon

(Tamang 222) in Drukpa or Bhutanese language. Dodan and his men may have been caught off guard by their enemies' strategy of attacking from behind with *sila*-s or rocks.¹³ Wounded at Chiponsila, Dodan managed to traverse twelve miles and reach Fedar Doba, where he, as claimed by some storytellers, fell from his elephant and died. Interestingly, while the plains' people refer to the lake as Fedar Doba, the Rabhas call it the Dodandubi or Dodan beel.¹⁴

South of Fedar Doba is the Nokornong forest, home to the ruins of two thrones, believed to be the stone seats of Dodan and his wife. Local lore claims that from these thrones, Dodan and his wife watched the soldiers perfecting their battle skills. Today, a temple stands beside Fedar Doba, where people pay annual homage to Dodan. A village fair is held there for a few days, and people recount the story of chaste Dumukchi and sing the 'Hai-Maru-Chai,' commemorating the daring deeds of Dodan and his army general Maru Khetri.

Conclusion

The legend of Dodan is a vital part of the oral tradition of the Rabhas of Goalpara, Assam, and the place names mentioned therein are recounted as part of the story of Dodan's journey and exploits. The geography of western lower Assam is culturally shaped by the episodes that form the legend, which also highlight the challenges the Rabhas faced and the resilience they showed during the early days of their settlement in Goalpara and the nearby places extending to the peripheries of the West Garo Hills. Some of these place names already existed, while others were newly created or modified as the Rabhas travelled alongside Dodan and sought to find their homes in new lands. In fact, in the telling of the Dodan legend, there is the assertion and preservation of the cultural identity of the tribe. The Rabhas, led by Dodan, did not ignore the landscape but engaged with it as they traversed it. Dodan's dominant presence in the landscape and his feats changed how these places would be perceived and remembered in

future times. As a result, the legend has become a living testament to a rich heritage in which the land and its stories have become inextricably intertwined.

Finally, there is ample scope for further research on this topic, especially for those interested in ethnic history, folklore and collective memory. A visit to the places the legend tells could provide valuable insight into how the Rabhas have intertwined myth and their material culture. Scholars of literature might also examine the politics behind place names and the construction of narrative authority in oral tradition. Analysing the legend of Dodan in greater detail could shed light on how the Rabhas preserve their collective memory and on the improvisations they make as they pass their stories down through the generations. Additionally, researchers in folklore studies could compare the insights this paper yields with similar traditions among other tribes that tend to associate their oral anecdotes with place-names and infuse their identities into local landscapes, thereby transforming them into narratives of cultural memory.

Credits

The author extends sincere gratitude to Charu Mohan Rabha for sharing the story of Dodan cursing Dumukchi for refusing to marry him. Besides that, he not only confirmed the names of several places often overlooked but also corrected the names and locations of some regions that, due to erroneous assumptions, have been linked to Dodan in relatively recent times. Without the enthusiastic evening gatherings and storytelling sessions organised by Lakhinath Rabha and his family, it would have been difficult to understand the deep connection the Rabhas have with Dodan. I am truly grateful to them.

Endnotes:

1. The Rabhas are an Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group, speaking a Tibeto-Burman language. They now live in western lower Assam and in the neighbouring regions of Meghalaya.
2. Dodan is fondly remembered as an early Rabha king and heir to the throne of Haha, and he is often regarded as the strongest among those who ruled the Rabhas. As long as he lived, he is said to have fought valiantly against many kings in numerous battles, achieving victory in several while suffering defeat in others. In his conflicts with tribes living to the east and south of Sonitpur, Dodan was nearly captured but managed to escape. He claimed victory over the Khasi kings Brek, Brok, Mermer, Murmur Chamkrong, and Bangkrong, but suffered defeats at the hands of Arimand, Birchand, and Chikrong. The Rabha ballad ‘Dodanni Chaychari’ (‘The Ballad of Dodan’) mentions Kings Chamkrong and Bankrong, who allegedly raided Dodan’s kingdom stealthily and forced the king to flee with his relatives under the cover of the night. Dodan’s glorious life has been immortalised in the *gest de Dodan*.
3. The ‘Hai-Maru’ song is a heartfelt prayer to the goddess Baikho. It evokes, albeit in brief mentions, memories of the legendary Rabha king and his equally brave army general. In one part of the song, Dodan is remembered as a king without an heir –

I saw Dodan, my maternal uncle.

Oh, a lonely, lonely king!

Neither has he relatives of his mother to call his own,

Nor has he an heir to perform the rites when he’ll be gone.

Oh, a lonely, lonely king indeed!

While the lyrics state that Dodan had no heir, some storytellers claim he had a grandson named Hochang, who once conquered the valley of Chongje-Dhaleswari-Someswari. For still

others, the grandson of Dodan was Bir Parsuram, the Rabha chief who fought against Mughal intruders in the 17th century. The Baharistan-i-Ghaibi mentions the army generals whom Parsuram fought against (Phukan 342).

4. To legitimise their rule and prevent their subjects from revolting, many tribal kings of Northeast India encouraged Brahmins and their native storytellers to create narratives that supported their divine right to rule. These myths and stories often linked their ancestors to ancient heroes from Indian epics and helped them proclaim the supernatural origins of their apical ancestors. For instance, the Ahom Burunjis record that the ancestors of the Ahom kings descended from heaven (Gait xi). Likewise, the Koch chronicle states that the Hindu God Shiva fathered the first Koch king, Biswa Singha (Nath 6). The Kachari kings trace their family genealogy to Bhima, one of the Pandava brothers in The Mahabharata (Endle 6-7).

Although Dodan may have had a normal childhood, his remarkable feats inspired storytellers to deify him. Over time, the tales about him drew on Hindu myths and other tribal traditions, and his true parentage became less significant. Some began describing him as the cursed god, Dadrang, who fell in love with Chikchi, a heavenly maiden, and, by the decree of the great god Krimichung, descended to earth to grow in the womb of Huhu, the queen of King Haha (Rabha 'Satī Dumukchi' 37).

5. While it is widely held that after leaving Sonitpur, Dodan had crossed the Brahmaputra to arrive on its southern bank, opinions differ regarding the exact location of his crossing. Some believe that he crossed the river near Mayong, while others suggest that it was at Jogighopa.
6. Baida lies about 5 km north of the Hatisila hills.

7. The Tikrikilla fort is historically significant in Koch history. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Koch kings held this fort against the Mughals.
8. The Darmang hills are located near Dodan's capital, Rabhagiri, which lies in the southeast of the hills. The Rongsai River flows 7 km south of the Rongsai market.
9. There is a notable similarity between the routes taken by the Garos before they eventually settled in the Garo Hills and the path that Dodan followed to arrive at the Goalpara region. The Garos later on chose to retreat further into the East and the West Garo Hills. Nokrek, located in the Tura Hills, provides evidence of early Garo settlements; however, the Garos seem to have forgotten to spin tales around these places.
10. Breggenti identifies the location as Landu Hill in the southeast of Boko, within Kamrup District, Assam, and mentions that one of its large caves is where the cave-dwelling tiger-men once lived (102). Over time, they retreated into the obscure recesses of the Garo Hills. The Garos have always feared the ruthlessness of the tiger-men. They believed that the Koasi or Khoasi Hills, lying on the northeastern side of the Garo Hills, were the home to the Durokma, or the Tiger mother goddess. At the exact geographical coordinates, one finds the Khasi Hills in this area. The tiger-men were likely the Khasi-Pnars who had once lived in Ka-mei-kha (Kamakhya) or Kamei-tien (Phukan 362) and later migrated to the hill tracts between the Garo and the Jaintiya hills. Historical records indicate that the 'Coccy' (Khasiya?) raiders occasionally came down to the plains to ruthlessly plunder and slaughter the plain-dwelling peasants in bordering areas of Assam and Sylhet (Mackenzie 220). They would destroy crops and cattle and set villages on fire before fleeing back to the hills. The victims of these were either beheaded, with their heads taken as trophies, or were captured and sacrificed to appease their deities.

11. In another version of this episode, narrated by my consultant, Dumukchi provokes Dodan's ire by playing a prank. She promises to marry him if he can catch two live fish with his bare hands, tie them to the ends of his moustache, and ask for her hand. However, as soon as the love-smitten king obliges and does exactly what she asks of him, Dumukchi bursts into laughter. Embarrassed for making a fool of himself, Dodan angrily throws the two fish as far as he can. Although no one really sees the fish fall, the legend has it that two pomelo trees grew at the spot where they landed. Whereas no place names are associated with the incident, Rabhas recall that one tree bore sweet fruit while the other produced sour fruit.
12. In one of the variant tellings of the legend, another episode is woven around the two rivers Jinjiram and Jinari. Chikchi, the divine maiden, is believed to be born as Dumukchi to the pious sage Jinjiram and his wife Jinari (Rabha 'Satī Dumukchi' 37).
13. Some Rabha storytellers recount that after losing the battle in Sonitpur, Dodan fled to Bhutan in search of assistance, but it was denied him. After his return from Bhutan, he stayed for a while at the Baghbar hillock in Barpeta before travelling along the Chaulkhowa River. He then crossed the Brahmaputra at Jogighopa to reach Pancharatna and Goalpara. From there, he pressed further south, reaching Lakhipur and later Tikrikilla, following the course of the rivulet Duldunga.
14. The Rabha folktales that recount the discovery of the sacred stone, which later came to be worshipped as goddess Baikho, also mention the lake Dodan Dubi, along with its other names: Dodan Doba and Debkongnang. Two sisters, Dikhaiba and Nadaiba, who are believed to have found this stone at the foot of a hillock, initially threw it into the lake, mistakenly believing that it was just an ordinary rock. However, every time they tried to catch fish, they found the same stone in their jakoi.

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