



Research Paper

“The formation of Matak: caste or community: A study in its historical perspective”

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The Matak are the inhabitants of Brahmaputra valley living here before the coming of the Ahoms. It is an interesting fact that within the Matak population several tribes and communities were existed earlier like Morans, Chutias, Kacharis, Bihias, Ahoms, Brittilas, and many caste-Hindus like Kayasthas and Kalitas.¹The Matak are well-known in the history of Assam for their resentment against the Ahom Government in the later half of 18th century. In many Buranjis it is known as 'MatakDauratmya' or 'Moranar ran', 'Moamaria Bidroh'² which led the Ahom kingdom to its decline. Some renowned persons of Matak community earlier tried to establish their identity as a religious community as the people of Matak community are the followers of Mayamaravaishnavism founded by Aniruddhadeva. But another group rejected this theory and according to them it is an indigenous community. The growth of the rebellion within one religious fraternity under the leadership of their religious leader Guru Astabhujadeva is an important fact and the people who ever had joined the rebellion better known as 'Matak' during the post-rebellious period although they were coming from different communities. As a result of this, the original 'Matak' community is expanded and many communities were absorbed in it. Some of the communities have completely lost their previous identity, but some of them are still carried on dual identity. Therefore, within the Matak community some confusion arose and such confusion within the community makes a serious problem for the Matak people to place their authentic identity as a whole.

The objectives of the paper:

The main objective of the paper is to analyze the origin of Matak community as established in the original sources. An attempt is always there to calculate the influence of Mayamaravaishnavism in creation of the greater Matak community during the period of Moamaria rebellion. The existence of different caste and communities in Matak community creates confusion that whether it is a community or a caste. Now the present scenario of the community is also an important part of the study as there is still a confusion that whether the community is a tribal community or not. Therefore, a humble attempt is in the paper to know the history of the formation of Matak community.

Research Methodology and Review of Literature:

A historical and analytical method is followed while studying the problem. Some primary sources like Buranjis, Reports of the British officers are used in the study. On the other hand interviews of the Matak specialists and personal observation also there to find out the solution. Renowned literatuer like Dr.MoheswarNeog, Dr. Hiren Gohain, Dr.Amlendu Guha and famous Matak thinkers like Dr.Shristidhar Dutta, Sushil Gogoi, Nakul Ch. Chetia had done many important works on Matak community or its relative subject Moamaria rebellion. So, these works are also vividly verified and used as important source material.

The origin of the Matak Community:

The population of Matak community is more than 20lakhs and most of them live in the Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts. The rest of them are scattered in the districts of Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sonitpur, Darrang and Nagaon. It is already mentioned that earlieritwas a combination of several communities and the Moranswere most dominant section of Matak community. But now the Morans no longer identify themselves as a branch of Matak community. During the time of the advent of the Ahoms, Sukapha came into confrontation with two tribes, The Morans and the Barahis. In the 'Ahom Buranji' of Rai Bahadur GolapchandraBarua, it is mentioned clearly that Sukapha met the Matak during that period.³Dr.Shristidhar

Dutta also gives an assertion that the Morans might be the same Matak who were renamed by Sukapha after witnessing the courage of the Morans. Because in Ahom language Ma means powerful (scholar) and Tak means weighed or tested; i. e. the tested powerful man. Such references are found in many Tai-Ahom and Assamese chronicles like, BanhgharriyaBurhagohainrBuranji, which is included in the DeodhaiAsomBuranji and SatsariAsomBuranji etc. The British officers like Robinson mentioned that the term 'Matak' was coined by the Singphos and the Khamtis.⁴ Later on, the same view was mentioned in the Imperial Gazetteer of India that the Matak inhabited in Lakhimpur District were so called by the Singphos as they were found to be stronger than the Mulungs or the weak people.⁵ So, there are little differences between the Moran and the Matak. Dr. Dambarudhar Nath, a renowned historian mentions that originally, they are from the same group and later on one group of them accepted vaishnavism earlier and another group came later on. The earlier group might be known as Matak and the other as Moran.⁶

Influence of Mayamara Vaishnavism and period of transition:

During the 17th century Mayamaravaishnavism spread up in the Upper Brahmaputra valley and all the tribes of this region are attracted by this liberal and egalitarian religion. All the tribes and communities like Chutias, Barahis, Kacharis, Ahoms, Kaivartas, Brittials and many caste Hindus like Brahmanas, Kalitas, Kayasthas also accepted this new religion and became the disciples of MayamaraSatra. Until the period of resentment against the Ahom Govt. in 18th century the wide use of Matak was not prevalent. Astabhujadeva, the religious Guru of MayamaraSatra was entangled with the rebellion although he was not interested in such matters earlier. But all the disciples along with his son seek his permission for the rebellion. Then at last he had joined the rebellion and all the disciples united against the Ahom royal force. Gradually the term 'Matak' is used to all the disciples of Astabhujadeva whoever had taken part in the rebellion. Thus, a greater religious community called 'Moamariya' or 'Mayamariya' or 'Mayamara' community was formed, which had drawn its members from different caste and tribes. Their communal unity was very strong and the British officials refer them as a tribe. According to Pamberton " the area of this island (ruled by Bura Senaputtee)is almost entirely inhabited by the Moamoreea, Moran, Muttuck or Morah tribe".⁷ Hunter in his Statistical Account of Assam writes, " The Moamariyas are rude tribe who had early become converts to Hinduism in its Vaisnavite form, but denied the supremacy of the Brahmanas".⁸ According to Robinsons the followers of this sect, namely the Matak " is divided into two distinct clans, the Moamarias so called, from their being a distinct sect from the generality of the Assamese, and the Morans, signifying the inhabitant of the jungle."⁹ It is also interesting to see that the different members of the Matak used their original identities with the term Matak as Matak-Moran, Matak-Chutia, Matak-Kachari, Matak-Ahom etc. But later on, some communities totally gave up their original identity and identify themselves as Matak. So, after the rebellion the period of transition was started and the Matak community felt their authentic anthropological identity rather than the religious identity. In the meantime, they got their political identity in 1805 A.D. after acquiring a separate land for them, named 'Matak Rajya'. All the disciples of Mayamaravaishnavism were known as Matak during that period and but in reality, all the disciples of Mayamaravaishnavism were not the Matak. The Matak are now very much conscious about their anthropological identity.

The identity crisis of the Matak:

In the census report of 1911, the Matak were shown as tribes, but later on this identity became invalid as nobody of this tribe was able to present themselves as tribes before the commission headed by Simon in 1929 A.D. Those who were proved themselves as tribes were recognized as tribes. As for example BhimbarDeori, Rupsingh Brahma, KarkachandraDoley were the well-educated persons of the respective communities, who were able to convince the British Govt. to register their communities in the tribal list. During that period there were no graduates among the Matak community. Later on, during the time of census in 1941 A.D. the Matak league again failed to include their name in the list. At last, after 1970 A.D. the community was recognized as 'More other backward Classes' (MOBC). Now the organizations of this community are trying to establish their demand as aboriginal tribal community of Assam. The main difficulty is the presence of caste Hindu communities within the Matak community who have no any tribal characteristics in it. On the other hand, they use the name of Matak in official documents, but socially they use the caste Hindu identity. So, the original Matak people are in crisis of identity. Although the leaders of Matak community tried their best to uplift their community but they could not follow a strict rule while giving someone the identity of the community.

Findings:

It is found in the study that the Matak are the aboriginal people of Assam like the Moran or the Barahis. They are very much similar to the Morans and their original land was the same area of present Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts. The same people were sometimes known as Matak and sometimes as Moran in the buranjis. Later on, when they adopted the similar religious belief, the distinction between them more minimized

and they rebel against the Ahom state jointly. During that period of uprising the religion and caste mixed up and many caste- Hindus like Kayasthas and Kalitas and other communities like Chutia, Kachari, Ahoms etc. entered to the community. Such communities considered the Matak Community as religious community and began to give their identity in dual terms. Generally, they consider their caste as per their original one and Matak became their religious identity. Gradually the situation became changed and the political consciousness grew among them and the same communities having earlier dual identities now gave up the old one and trying to assimilate in the Matak community. Therefore, the Matak community became expanded and now only the caste-Hindus like Kayasthas and Kalitas are the members of Matak community who continue the dual identity.

As a whole it is a clear fact that--

- (1) The Matak community is not a religious community. It has some tribal characteristics for which it should be recognized as tribe.
- (2) It has drawn its members from different communities and all are submerged in it as one community.
- (3) It is a community of Mongoloid origin.
- (4) The liberal outlook of the community absorbed all the tribes in it and gave them a greater identity.

Suggestions:

- (1) Leaders of the community should be conscious while giving the identity certificate to someone.
- (2) The people of the community should aware of their position. They should uplift themselves not by acquiring some facilities from Govt., but by proper education and consciousness.
- (3) All the members of the community should give one identity, not the dual identity.
- (4) A serious census should be done by the community to know the actual strength of the community.

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