

**THE
MATAKS
AND
THEIR
KINGDOM**

**CASTES AND
TRIBES OF ASSAM**



S. DUTTA

The Matak, an aboriginal people of Assam, whose history and culture is the theme of the work, had its members drawn from different tribes and communities of Assam such as, Morans, Chutias, Kacharis, Bihias, Ahoms, Kaivartas, Brittials and many caste Hindus like : Brahmanas, the Kayasthas and the Kalitas. Their common bond of Unity was their Sect, which developed through the Mayamara *Satra*, with the *Guru* (Preceptor) at its head, placing all of them on an equal democratic footing.

The Matak are mainly known to the readers of Assam history as the authors of the first popular rebellion (1769 A. D.) against the Ahom Government. Infact this was "the first Socio-Political movement in the history of Assam, made for the people and by the people". This transformation of the Matak, into a militant body, has infact, its parallel in the Sikhs. The then Ahom monarch Gaurinath Singha after getting back his throne with the British help, conciliated the Matak by ceding to them an autonomous kingdom known as the Matak Kingdom in 1805. But the subsequent deteriorating political condition of Assam led to clashes of the two imperialistic forces-the Burmese from the east and the British from the west-in the political stage of Assam, leading finally to its annexation by the British. The imperialistic wave of the British at last deluged the Matak Kingdom also-in 1839.

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The Matakas and their Kingdom

Castes and Tribes of Assam



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This work is almost a reproduction of my Ph. D. Thesis submitted to the Dibrugarh University, entitled 'The Matak and their kingdom', with minor corrections and amendments here and there, as per suggestions of the learned Examiners. The Mataks, the disciples of the Mayamara Satra, whose history and culture is the theme of this work, are one of the aboriginal peoples of Assam, and have played a very significant role in various evolutionary phases of the history and civilisation of Assam. The population of the Matak at present, according to an unofficial source, is more than 12 lakhs. Though majority of them now live in the Dibrugarh district of Assam, a good number of them are also found in Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Darrang and Nowgong districts. The early history of the Matak is obscure. It is only with the coming of the Ahoms in the early part of the 13th century that we get the first reference to the Matak in the political history of the land. The Matak were conciliated by Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam. But subsequently, they, for various reasons, became critical of the Ahom government and in 1769 reared against it the first standard of their Rebellion, which is usually known as the Moamaria Rebellion in the history of Assam. They deposed the then Ahom king Laksmi Singha and placed their own ruler Ramakanta on the throne. Even though this usurpation was shortlived, the Matak were not reconciled; they revolted again and again. At last, Purnananda Buragohain, the Ahom Premier (1783-1817) made a compromise with them in 1805 recognising their autonomy. This autonomous Matak Kingdom, with its capital at Bengmara (present Tinsukia town of Assam), was recognised by the British too. But the annexationist policy of the British deluged the Matak Kingdom in 1839.

Though some scholars have dealt with this problem within the limitations of their works, it can safely be said that much remains to be done, and the Matak, as such, with their history, culture and civilisation need a special study. It is, therefore, felt that a number of problems like the creation of the Matak community under the banner of their Satra, drawing members from different castes and tribes, the relation of the

Satra with the Ahom government, the process of the organisation of a popular Rebellion centering mainly round the humiliations heaped upon the heads of the *Satra* and some of the disciples, a correct analysis of the nature of the Rebellion which brought forth all disaffected elements into action everywhere in the Ahom kingdom, the foundation of the Matak Kingdom, life of the people under its government, exact relation between the Matak rulers or Barsenapatis with the Ahom and the British governments, etc., deserve proper scrutiny and scientific treatment. An analysis is also felt essential on the religious beliefs prior to their conversion to Vaisnavism and the impact of this new creed on their socio political life. As such, it is an humble attempt to analyse these problems and give, on the whole, a connected and clear account of the political history of the Matak with relevant weightage to their social life, on the basis of all available sources, both published and unpublished.

The work has been divided into seven chapters. Chapter I gives a brief introduction of the subject with an attempt to interpret the meaning of the terms 'Matak', 'Matek', 'Moamaria' and 'Mayamara'. It also deals with the racial origin and political background of the different tribes and castes composing the Matak community. Chapter II gives an idea of the socio-economic life of the Matak before and after their conversion to Vaisnavism. In Chapter III, an attempt has been made to discuss the conflicts of allegiance of the Matak to their own *Satra* versus the State. Chapter IV deals with the Rebellion of the Matak against the Ahom monarchy, with an attempt to analyse its real nature. In Chapter V, the spread of the Rebellion to all the disaffected elements in the Ahom kingdom leading to the coming of Capt. Welsh to Assam, and the establishment of the Matak Kingdom has been discussed. Chapter VI deals with the Matak Kingdom under its own rulers and its relations with the Ahom and the British governments till its annexation by the British in 1839. Chapter VII, the concluding one, gives an idea of the life and conditions of the Matak people after their subjugation by the British and their attitude to the alien rule, where an attempt has also been

made to analyse the causes of the present backwardness of these once historically powerful people.

To complete the work, I had to collect data from different libraries like the National Archives of India, New Delhi, the National Library, Calcutta, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, Gauhati, the libraries of Dibrugarh University and Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat. I express my sincere gratitude to the authorities of these libraries for their help and co-operation.

I am thankful to Dr. (Mrs.) N. Chatterjee, Principal of my college and to the Government of Arunachal Pradesh for granting me leave for completing the work. I also take the opportunity to extend my gratefulness to all the *Satradhikars*, specially to Sri Jibananda Ch. Goswami of Dinjoy Mayamara *Satra*, the *Dekadhikars* of the different Mayamara *Satras* and leading personalities of the Matak community whom I interviewed in connection with my work.

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I am thankful to my colleague Prof. H.N. Bora, M.Sc. for helping me in drawing the maps. My thanks are also due to Sri K. Gogoi for typing out the manuscript. Lastly, I extend my thanks to my wife Uma Dutta and all other colleagues of mine who have extended their help and inspiration to complete the work.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AAL — R.M. Lahiri, *The Annexation of Assam*.
- AARB — S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*.
- AB — *Ahom Buranji*, (ed. & tr.), G.C. Barua.
- AB(SM) — *Asam Buranji* (obtained) from the family of Sukumar Mahanta), (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan.
- ABNP — Padmeswar Sinha Naobaicha Phukan Buragohain, Ms. *Asam Buranji*.
- ACMSV — Chidananda Goswami, *Sri Sri Aniruddhadevar Charitra aru Mayamara Gosain Sakalar Vamsawali*.
- ADCB — H.K. Barpujari, *Assam : In the Days of the Company*.
- APB — *Asamar Padya Buranji*, (ed.), S.K. Bhuyan.
- BPG — *Barphukanar Git*, (ed.), S.K. Bhuyan.
- BPC — *Bengal Political Consultations*.
- BSPC — *Bengal Secret and Political Consultations*.
- BRC — *Bengal Revenue Consultations*.
- BVMD — Maniram Dewan, Ms. *Buranji Vivek Ratna*, Vol. II.
- CBMR — Sarbananda Rajkumar, *Chutiya, Bhuyan aru Matak Rajya*.
- DAB — *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, (ed.), S.K. Bhuyan.
- DHAS — Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati.

- HAG — E.A. Gait, *History of Assam*.
- HKB — Harakanta Barua, *Asam Buranji*, (ed.), S.K. Bhuyan.
- ISSB — Sarbananda Rajkumar, *Itihashe Suanra Chasata Bachar*.
- IHQ — *Indian Historical Quarterly*.
- JARS — *Journal of Assam Research Society*.
- JASB — *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*.
- KTP — Kashinath Tamuli Phukan, *Asam Buranji Sar*, (ed.), P.C. Chaudhury.
- PAB — *Purani Asam Buranji*, (ed.), H.C. Goswami.
- PHA (I) — *Political History of Assam*, Vol. I, (ed.), H.K. Barpujari, et al.
- SAB — *Satsari Asam Buranji*, (ed.), S.K. Bhuyan.
- SRSB — S.K. Bhuyan, *Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha*.
- TB — Sreenath Duara Barbarua, *Tungkhungia Buranji*, (ed.), S.K. Bhuyan.
- TB (E) — —do— (English version).

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Introduction

Scope of the work :

Situated in the North-East Frontier of India, Assam is an integral part of the country with a history of her own. Assam has been contributing, since time immemorial, towards the growth and development of the Indian culture.¹ Like India, Assam also presents a picture of great variety with her people belonging to different racial groups, speaking different dialects and professing different religious rites and practices.² Assamese culture, being thus a composite one, the true essence of it is not properly understood without a study of the history and civilisation of its different constituent elements. The Matakas who formed a distinct community by themselves, developing certain cultural traits and patterns of social behaviour under the Vaisnava reformers, form one of these important constituent elements. They also played a very significant role in the political developments of the history of

1. S.K. Chatterjee, *The Place of Assam in the history and Civilization of India*, Gauhati, 2nd print, 1970, p. 82.
2. N.K. Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age*, Calcutta, 1960, pp. 1 f.

the entire north-east, since they became politically organised towards the later part of the 18th century till the annexation of their kingdom to British India in 1839.

The Mataks are mainly known to the readers of Assam history as the authors of the first popular rebellion against the Ahom government (1769), which had till then an uninterrupted sovereignty for more than five hundred years. They challenged the despotism of the Ahom monarchy based on divine right, deposed the reigning King Laksmi Singha and put their own nominee, Ramakanta, a commoner, on the throne. Their success, however, was shortlived. The Ahom king soon recovered his throne and attempted at complete extermination of the Mataks. The resultant bloodshed made the waters of the rivers red with the blood of the Mataks and the roads filled with their corpses.³ But even this inhuman cruelty did not damp the spirit of the Mataks. In 1786 they again rose in rebellion against the government in alliance with hill-tribes, occupied the capital at Rangpur and compelled the reigning king Gaurinath Singha (1780-1795) to take his flight to Gauhati.

This success of the Mataks brought forth all the disaffected dormant elements into action everywhere in the Ahom kingdom. Krishnanarayan, a rebellious Koch prince of Darrang, even procured the assistance of the Barkandazes and committed depredations in the Ahom territory. The situation became so critical that the king was compelled to appeal to the Company Government in Bengal for help. The latter, long-interested in having commercial relationship with Assam, immediately caught hold of the opportunity and sent Captain Welsh to Assam with a contingent of 360 Sepoys (September, 1792). Welsh settled Krishnanarayan's issue, made commercial treaty with the Ahom king advantageous to the British, and recovered the Ahom capital from the possession of the Mataks.

3. Maniram Dewan, *Buranji Vivek-ratna*, MS No. 272, DHAS, Gauhati, (henceforth abbreviated as BVMD).

After Welsh's return in July 1794, the Mataks again occupied the capital city and began to form alliance with the Burmese. They evade a crisis for the time being, Purnananda Buragohain, the Ahom Premier, made a compromise with the Mataks by ceding to them an autonomous kingdom bounded by the Brahmaputra on the north and the west, the Buri Dihing on the south and an imaginary line drawn from Kundil Mullah i.e. Sadiya to the Buri Dihing on the east, in 1805 and conferred the title Barsenapati, on their Chief. This apparently solved the question of the Mataks. But neither the British nor the Burmese would rest content merely with commercial benefits or alliance of the anti-Ahom forces. Indeed, with the conquest of Arakan in 1784, the Burmese possessions in the south-west became contiguous to those of British India. Thenceforth, the Burmese had continuous misunderstanding with the British who possessed the district of Chitagong touching the frontiers of Arakan and separated from it by the river Naf. Magh or Arakanese refugees began to pour into the British territory, which event, made the relations between the British and the Burmese governments strained.

Meanwhile, taking advantage of the internal situation in Assam arising out of the rivalry of two leading Nobles, Purnananda Buragohain, the Premier and Badanchandra, the Barphukan, or the Governor of Gauhati, the Burmese invaded Assam in 1817 and continued their attacks till they became the virtual master of the land in 1821. Intending to extend their sway further to the west of Assam, the Burmese made frequent inroads to the British territory. Their occupation of the islands of Shahpuri at the mouth of the river Naf in 1823 followed by their warlike preparation in Assam, Cachar and Arakan and their march to Bhutan⁴, made it crystal clear that they were bent on invading British territory. Early in 1824, when the Burmese converged on Cachar from three directions, the British declared war on them on March 5, 1824. In the Brahmaputra valley, the war began early in March, 1824. In the

4. H.H. Wilson, *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War*, Nos. 19-21; AARB, p. 512.

course of events that followed, the British expelled the Burmese from Assam and by the terms of the Treaty of Yandaboo, (February, 1826), which ended the First Anglo-Burmese war, the British came into possession of Assam along with other territories like Manipur, Cachar, Jaintia, etc.

After occupying Assam, the British recognised the autonomy of the Matak kingdom, as they were in need of the assistance of the Matak to fight the turbulent hill-tribes in its neighbourhood, like those of the Singphos and the Khamtis. But as soon as the British consolidated their position in Assam and subjugated these hill-tribes, the alliance of the Matak was no longer essential. Consequently, the Matak kingdom was annexed to the British possessions in 1839.

As such, a study on the history and culture of the Matak forms an important chapter in the history of the North-East. Certain scholars within the limitations of their own works have dealt with the Rebellion of the Matak or the annexation of the Matak kingdom to the British. But such accounts are too sketchy to give a clear and complete picture of the important role that these people played in the history of this part of the country. An attempt is, therefore, made in the following few pages of this work to give an account of the history of the Matak with particular emphasis on the significant role that they played in the political development of this land since they rose in rebellion against the Ahom government in 1769.

The terms Matak, Moran, Moamaria and Mayamaria

The population of the Matak community, at present according to a census, carried through their own organisation, *Sadaw Assam Matak Sanmilan*, is more than 12 lakhs.⁵ Most of them live in the present Dibrugarh district, which once formed the major part of their kingdom. The rest lie scattered through-

5. Malbhog Barua, 'Matak Jati aru Matak Sanmilan' (in Assamese), *Souvenir Sadaw Asam Matak Sanmilan aru Sadaw Asam Matak Chhatra Sanmilan*, Chabua, 1977, p. 18.

out the Brahmaputra Valley, mainly, in the districts of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Darrang and Nowgong. Now they are included in the list of the More Other Backward Classes, of Assam.

There is a great difference of opinion regarding the origin of the word 'Matak' and its actual interpretation. The term is also confused with those of 'Moran' and 'Mayamaria' or 'Moamaria', and often used in an identical sense with them. According to one group of scholars, the actual spelling of the term is not 'Matak' but 'Matek' (*Mat*—principle or creed, *Ek*—one), meaning a people of one determination, principle or creed. This interpretation of the origin of the word 'Matek' which was later corrupted into that of 'Matak', as alleged, has been given in the *ayamara Satrar Vamsawali*, which states that this name was first given to them by the Ahom King Susenpha alias Pratap Singha (1603-1641) after testing the unflinching obedience of the 'Matek' disciples to their *Guru*.⁶ R.K. Bordoloi, a well-known Assamese scholar, supports the contention given by the *Vamsawali*, and further states, that at a later period, the term 'Matek' was corrupted into 'Matak' in an insulting and derogatory sense.⁷ This story however, is not mentioned in any other contemporary source. Even then, there would have been no difficulty in accepting the contention, if there did not occur the term 'Matak' in certain old *buranjis* preceding the reign of Pratap Singha, although some scholars like P. Gogoi assert that the combination of the words *Mat* + *Ek* should have been 'Matoik' and not 'Matek'.⁸

The *buranjis*, while giving a picture of the political conditions of the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley at the time of the advent of the Ahoms, a group of Tai-Shans from Upper Burma under the leadership of Sukapha in the early part of the

6. Chidananda Gaswami, *Sri Aniruddhadevar Charitra aru Mayamara Satrar Gosain Sakalar Vamsawali*. Tinsukia, 1933, pp. 47ff (henceforth abbreviated as ACMSV).

7. R.K. Bordoloi, 'Mayamara Sakalar Bishaye' (in Assamese) incorporated in ACMSV.

8. P. Gogoi, *Tai Ahom Religion and Customs*, Gauhati, 1976, pp. 107 ff.

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13th century, refer to the Matak as a tribe ruling within Buri Dihing river on the north, Disang river in the south, Suffry river in the east and Brahmpautra in the west⁹. According to several Tai-Ahom and Assamese chronicles, like those of *Bangharia Buragohain's Buranji*, which is included in the *Deodhai Assam Buranji*¹⁰, and *Asam Buranji from Khunlung-Khunlai to Arjun Dihingia, Raja (1675-1677)* incorporated in the *Satsari Assam Buranji*,¹¹ the Ahoms named the people they met, according to their physical traits or nature. In the Ahom language *Ma* means powerful (scholar) and *Tak* means weighed or examined, i.e., a tested powerful man.¹² Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam had to face a strong resistance from a section of the Marans, whom he ultimately overcame by applying a two-fold policy of coercion and conciliation. After their subjugation, one of the Morans displayed great courage in defeating the Nagas for Sukapha and thus rendered a great service to him.¹³

There are, therefore, reasons to believe that impressed by the courage of the Morans Sukapha and his followers might have named them as 'Matak'. Late Golap Chandra Barua, the noted Tai-Ahom linguist, found the term 'Matak' in several *buranji*s written in that language, dealing with the events from the time of Sukapha till the end of the 16th century.¹⁴ Later Assamese

9. *Buragohain Vamsawali* (MS).
10. *Deodhai Assam Buranji* (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan, DHAS, Gauhati, 1932, pp. ff (henceforth abbreviated as DAB).
11. *Satsari Assam Buranji* (Ist chronicle), (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan, Gauhati University, 1960, p. 4. (henceforth abbreviated as SAB).
12. Malbhog Barua, *loc. cit.*, pp. 12 f; B. Sarma, *Presidential Speech, All Assam Matak Sammilan*, Tinsukia Session, 1968; B. Das, 'Buranji Matak Moran' (in Assamese), *Manideep*, 8th year, Nos. 2 & 3; J. Talukdar, 'Matak Sabdar Utpati O Tatparjya', (in Assamese), *Assam Bani*, 28th August, 1976. These articles are also inserted in a book named *Mayamara Satra-Samaj : Bhashan aru Prabandha* (ed.) S. Gogoi, Chabua, 1981.
13. Hem Chandra Goswami, *Purani Assam Buranji*, Gauhati, 1922, pp. 30 f (henceforth abbreviated as PAB).
14. B. Sarma, *loc. cit.*, p. 4; B. Das, *loc. cit.*, P. 72; J. Talukdar, *loc. cit.*, pp. 80 ff.

chronicles, like those of Kashinath Tamuli Phukan,¹⁵ and Harakanta Sarma Barua,¹⁶ have clearly mentioned that the Matak referred to in connection with Sukapha's encounter with the local tribes, were the Morans.

Incidentally the word 'Matak' had a similar meaning among the Singphos and the Khamtis also. Following this, certain British officers and historians like Robinson,¹⁷ opined that the term 'Matak' was coined by the Khamtis. Later on, this view found mention in the *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, which states that the Matak used to inhabit the district of Lakhimpur (which included at that time the present district of Dibrugarh as well), and that they were so called by the Singphos because they were found to be strong 'in contradiction of the *Mullang* or weak-people'¹⁸ of the Ahom kingdom. Maniram-Dewan also, writing in the early part of the 19th century, accepted this interpretation regarding the origin of the word 'Matak', coined according to him, by the Khamtis and meaning 'a man with a robust and vigorous physique',¹⁹ which the Morans did actually possess. The *Census Report of Assam* for 1881,²⁰ however, has mentioned 'Matak' as an old division of Upper Assam, which is supported by Hunter also.²¹ The *Census Report of Assam* for 1891, on the other hand, mentions like this, 'the term Matak applies to the people residing in the tract of country formerly ruled by the

15. Kashinath Tamuli Phukan, *Assam Buranji* (ed.) P.C. Choudhury (now entitled *Assam Buranji Sar*), 3rd impression, 1964, p. 10 (henceforth abbreviated as KTP).
16. Harakanta Sarma Barua, *Assam Buranji* (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan, 2nd edition, 1962, p. 12 (henceforth abbreviated as HKB).
17. William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Reprint, 1975, pp. 326 ff.
18. *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (Provincial series), Eastern (Bengal and Assam, Calcutta, p. 35.
19. BVMD.
20. *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*, Calcutta, 1883, pp. 98 f.
21. W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. I, Reprint, 1975, p. 292.

Bor Senapati, and has no reference to any particular caste or tribe."²²

Rajmohan Nath gives a different interpretation to the origin of the term 'Matak'. According to him it originated from the term 'Mahtak' meaning the head or upper part of the country, inhabited by the Moria sect of the Austrics, who after their assimilation with the Bodo tribes came to be known as the Morans.²³

According to S.K. Bhuyan the word 'Matak', "by which the Morans, and loosely the Moamarias, are known, is also applied to a robust and sturdy man lacking in refinement and not easily amenable to reason."²⁴ Gunabhiram Barua in his *Assam Buranji* uses the term 'Matak' while referring to Sukapha's confrontation with the tribes.²⁵ According to a modern scholar S. Rajkumar, the Moamarias are called 'Mataks', for they fought as one man against the Ahom monarch and finally occupied the throne.²⁶ It is possible that during the time of the Matak Rebellion, any rebel joining hands with the Mataks or giving any kind of support to them was also labelled as Mataks, even though they were not members of the Matak community or Mayamara sect.

Nothing is known regarding the origin of the word 'Moran'. According to certain members of the Moran elderfolk, whom I had interviewed, the word owes its origin to a myth. It is said that an old lady of this community, a physician by profession, had the supernatural power of giving life to dead ones, for which she was called 'Moran', meaning one who can

22. *Census of India, 1891, Assam*, Vol. I, Report by E.A. Gait, 1892, pp. 236 ff.

23. R.M. Nath, *The Background of Assamese Culture*, 2nd edition 1978, p. 2.

24. S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, 2nd edition, 1974, pp. 254 f, (henceforth abbreviated as AARB).

25. Gunabhiram Barua, *Assam Buranji*, Reprint, 1972, p. 67.

26. S. Rajkumar, *Chutiya, Bhuyan aru Matak Rajya*, Gauhati, 1965, p. 66 (henceforth abbreviated as CBMR)

call back a dead (*Mor-Mar*-to die; *an*-to bring-meaning to bring back a dead one). This contention, however, appears doubtful. Kedar Brahmachari expresses the view that a people known as *Maurang*, *Muurang* or *Morang*, migrated to *Saumar* area (estermost part) of ancient Assam from Nepal and, in course of time, came to be known as Morans.²⁷ Biradhar Das echoing a similar view, states that these people migrated to Assam with a prince of Nepal in about 7th century A.D. They entered first to western Assam, proceeded further to *Saumar*, settled there and in course of time, came to be known as Morans.²⁸ Benudhar Sarma, however, has mentioned that many years before the coming of Sukapha to *Saumar*, a man from the *Meram* clan of the kingdom of Dharmapala, a king of ancient Assam, became king in a place known as Lahdoi (the region lying on the south of Upper Brahmaputra and on the east of Sadiya). The word Moran perhaps was coined from the name of this king.²⁹ According to Endle, the original home of the Morans was in the Hukong valley and the term 'Moran' comes from the name of their progenitor 'Moran', who came over to Assam and settled near the Tiphuk river.³⁰

In the British records of the period, the term 'Moran' sometimes finds a reference as a distinct tribe inhabiting the jungles,³¹ and sometimes as a division of Upper Assam, denoting the northern part of the Matak country which covered the extensive tract of land to the east and north-east of Dibrugarh, 'where several *Gosains*' had their residence, and which was inhabited by the Moran people.³² J.P. Wade, one of the earliest British officers mentions the term 'Moran' [to mean the rebels against the Ahom monarch].³³ There is no denying:

27. Kedar Brahmachari, in an article in *Batori* (now extinct), the edition of 1st August, 1931.

28. B. Das, *loc. cit.*, pp. 63 ff.

29. B. Sarma, *loc. cit.*, p. 5.

30. S. Bindle, *The Kacharis*, Reprint, 1975, pp. 87 f.

31. Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 326 ff.

32. *The Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*, *loc. cit.*, pp. 98 f.

33. J. P. Wade, (ed.), B. Sarma, *An Account of Assam*, 2nd impression, 1972, pp. 164 ff.

the fact that it was after the name of the Moran tribe that the locality they inhabited also came to be known as such. Earlier, the tract of Moran was a large one, covering an extensive area of the present Dibrugarh district, but, at present, the name Moran is applied only to a sub-division of this district.

Whatever the origin of the term 'Moran' might be, it is an established fact that it denotes a tribe who was also called 'Matak'. It is interesting to note how the term 'Matak' originally applied to a particular tribe, in course of time, came to be used to denote tribes other than the Morans and also members of the caste-Hindus, like the Brahmanas, Kayasthas and Kalitas. This was possible through the process of Aryanisation of the different Bado tribes dwelling in the eastern part of Assam through the Vaisnava reformers. The Morans were the first tribe in eastern Assam to be converted to Vaisnavism by Aniruddhadeva, the founder of the Mayamara *Satra*, about whom we shall discuss in detail in a subsequent chapter of this work. Certain patterns of behaviour and laws of discipline were set for them by the great reformer. The task was, however, not easy. Vaisnavism had to make large-scale compromises with them. It may also be noted that the new creed brought for them not merely a new ideology, but also a new way of life, which had a great impact on their tribal economy. Ploughing was introduced, certain craft and industries were taught and the community feeling, which existed in their tribal life, was given fresh impetus for development. This had encouraged the other neighbouring tribes, like the Barahis, Kacharis and the Chutiyas, to accept the new creed. These new tribes, as they conformed to the disciplines already set in for the Matak, were not distinguished from them by separate appellations. In the process, they preferred to introduce them as 'Matak'. As a result, the term 'Matak' was no longer confined to the Moran people alone, but was extended to include the other tribal members as well. P. Gogoi found that even the Ahoms, who became disciples of the Mayamara *Satra*, had identified themselves with the Matak and did not

introduce them as Ahoms but as Matak.³⁴ In course of time, Brahmana families in the neighbourhood of the *Satra* and so also the Kalitas became members of the same *Satra*, and identified them as such.

Thus a greater community, namely, the Matak community was formed, which had its members drawn from different castes and tribes. As pointed out by S.K. Bhuyan,

The Moamarias were all disciples of one *Satra*, or its few branches : but they belonged to separate tribes and communities, Morans, Chutiyas, Kacharis, Bihias, Ahoms, Kaivartas and Brittials ; any many caste Hindus, Brahmanas, Kayasthas and Kalistas were found among the Moamarias. The disciples were confined to no particular territory, but were scattered over the whole country as far as Goalpara.³⁵

Their common bond of unity was their sect, i.e. the Mayamara sect, which developed through the Mayamara *Satra* with the *Guru* at its head. Their communal unity was so strong and their tribal traits so predominant that some of the British officials refer to the Matak not as a community but as a tribe. Thus, Pemberton states that "the area of this island (ruled by the Burra Sunaputtee).....is almost entirely inhabited by the Moamareea, Moran, Muttuck or Marah tribe."³⁶ Hunter in his *Statistical Report of Assam* also writes, "The Moamarias are a rude tribe who had early become converts to Hinduism in its Vishnuvite form, but denied the supremacy of the Brahmanas."³⁷ Robinson mistook the term 'Matak' to denote the Mayamara sect³⁸ and stated that this sect, namely the Matak, "it divided into two distinct clans, the Moamarias, so

34. P. Gogoi, *Tai Ahom Religion and Customs*, pp. 109 ff.

35. AARB, p. 254.

36. R.B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, 2nd impression, 1966, p. 70.

37. Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

38. Robinson. *op. cit.*, pp. 326 ff.

called, from their being a distinct sect from the generality of the Assamese ; and the Morans, signifying the inhabitants of the jungles.”³⁹ This shows that not only the Morans but the non-Morans also appeared to be members of a distinct clan possessing tribal traits, and, as such, different from the rest of the Assamese population. It also appears that initially the different members of the Matak community used their respective original identities as a suffix to the term Matak, such as, Matak-Moran, Matak-Chutiya, Matak-Kachari, Matak-Ahom, etc. This practice was abandoned during the time of the Matak Rebellion, when all members preferred to identify themselves with a single identity, namely, the Matak community. The Census Report for 1881 mentions that “a follower of one of these *Gosains* would call himself Matak Moran, but the distinction is one neither of caste nor nationality.”⁴⁰

Later, during the British rule, when the spirit of communalism grew strong in the whole country under the patronage of the government, a tendency also arose among the members of the Matak community to introduce themselves through their separate identities. It was, therefore, beginning with the announcement of the Communal Award in August 1932, that the Matak also started introducing themselves through their separate identities now using them as prefixes to the term Matak, such as Kalita-Matak, Moran-Matak, Kachari-Matak, Ahom-Matak, etc. Any way, the term ‘Matak’ in the recent times got wide publicity in the process of the political development of the period, when they organised a society in 1937 under the nomenclature ‘*Matak-Moran Sanmilian*’, later on known simply as *Matak Sanmilian* which included all the members of the Matak community, with the Morans as the pre-ponderant group. Subsequently however, the Morans defected from the *Sanmilian* and formed their own organisation called the *Moran Sabha* in 1965, thinking that if they identified themselves with the rest of the members of the Matak

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*, loc. cit., pp. 98 f.

community, which included the non-tribals also, their demand to get consideration as a Scheduled-tribe by the National Government would be weakened.

When the Matak carved out their own kingdom, which got recognition from the Ahom government in 1805 as the *Matak Rajya* or the kingdom of the Matak, all people living within that territory came to be identified as Matak. In course of time, subjects from the Ahom kingdom also infiltrated to the Matak kingdom. These people also came to be known as Matak, even though they were not members of the Mayamara sect, or the Matak community, but the number of such Matak was very few. At present, we do not find any Matak in Assam, who is not a disciple of the Mayamara *Mahantas* or *Satrdhikars*. It was, therefore, not the kingdom but the people who named it as *Matak Rajya*. Although this fact is very clear, some British officers used to refer to ‘Matak’ as the name of an old division of Upper Assam. Even according to Gait, Matak is a territory, ‘which lay to the south of Sadiya, in the angle between the Brahmaputra and the Burhi Dihing, and was chiefly inhabited by persons of the Moamaria sect’.⁴¹ Pemberton and Hunter also meant by the term ‘Matak’ usually a geographical division in Upper Assam divided into Upper and Lower Matak and chiefly inhabited by the Moamarias or the Morans.⁴² These officers were under the impression that these people were so called mainly because they inhabited the territory called the *Matak Rajya*; but we have already contended that it was not the territory but the people who named it as such.

As the terms ‘Matak’ and ‘Moamaria’ or ‘Mayamaria’ are used in an identical sense, as because all the members of the Matak community are also disciples of the Mayamara *Satra*, the origin of the word ‘Moamara’ or ‘Mayamara’ deserves a reference here. According to the *Satrdhikars* of the Mayamara

41. E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, 2nd edition, revised. Calcutta, 1926, p. 59 (henceforth abbreviated as HAG).

42. Pemberton, *op. cit.*, p. 70; Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

Satras, the actual term is not 'Moamara' but 'Mayamara'. The *Mayamara Satrar Vamsawali* contends that the appellation 'Mayamara' was given to their original *Guru* Aniruddhadeva by the Ahom king Sukhapha Khora Raja (1552-1603), being impressed by the former's mastery over *maya* or magic, by which, he could create a cobra out of an empty pitcher and then make it vanish simply by touching the sides of it. From this incident, Aniruddhadeva's *Satra* came to be known as 'Mayamara'.⁴³ But, according to Utsawananda Goswami, an ex-*Satradhikar* of the Puranimati *Mayamara Satra*, the *Satra* was so named by the Ahom King Susengpha alias Pratap Singha or Buddhiswarga Narayan (1603-1641) as he found the *Guru* and the disciples of the *Mayamara Satra* above *maya* or pleasure and not easily overpowered by worldly temptations.⁴⁴ These accounts appear to be unscientific and not supported by historical records. M. Neog rightly concludes that it was a *Bhakatiya Byakhya* or the interpretation of a devotee to ascribe supernatural power to the founder of the *Satra*.⁴⁵

R.M. Nath gives a different interpretation to the origin of the term 'Mayamara'. He states that "the Moria sect of the Austrics, who were originally known as the Mei-Morias settled in the north-eastern part of the country which was later known as the head or the 'Mahtak' or Matak country. Later on they mixed up with the Bodos and other tribes and were known as Morans, while their tribe-name was changed from Mei-Moria to Maya-Moria or Moamaria.⁴⁶ But his theory is not supported by any other source, nor is there any evidence to ascribe Austric origin to the Morans against their well-founded Bodo origin.

It is seen that in case of the other *Satras* of Assam, most of them are named after their geographical location. It is, therefore, probable that the *Satra* was called Moamara because it was located at one time, in the early period of its history,

43. ACMSV, pp. 27 f.

44. Utsawananda Goswami, *Malau Patharar Buranji*, p. 8.

45. M. Neog, *Mayamariyar Buranji*, Chabua, 1968, p. 3.

46. R.M. Nath, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

on the bank of the *Moamari Bil* which abounded in *Moa* fish. This view was first forwarded by Maniran Dewan. Supporting Dewan's contention, Robinson stated that the people who inhabited the area close to the lake were called Moamara and the *Satra* located therein was also therefore called as such.⁴⁷ According to Maniram Dewan, Aniruddhadeva founded two *Satras*, one at Moamara and the other at Puranimati near Jorhat.⁴⁸ But this is not mentioned in other sources including the *Vamsawali* of the *Mayamara Satra*. There is a tribal area in upper Majuli which is still known as Moamara,⁴⁹ which evidences the existence of a lake bearing that name in that area at one time. The lake might have dried up or washed away by the Brahmaputra, as Majuli is still the most flood-affected area of Assam.

The term 'Mayamara' is found neither in the *buranjis* nor in the *Chrit-puthis* (biographies of the Vaisnava saints). Only one official record, a letter dated 8th *Ahara*, 1724 *Saka* (July, 1802) written by King Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1811) to the then Governor-General, Wellesly, used the term 'Mayamara'. But, in course of time, the term 'Mayamara' became more popular than that of 'Moamara', perhaps because, the heads of the *Mayamara Satras* give wide publicity to this term through their published *Vamsawali*. Moreover, as there is hardly any difference in the accent of the word 'Moamara' to 'Mayamara', the gradual corruption of the term 'Mayamara' to 'Moamara' or vice versa was but very natural.

As the *Mayamara Mahanta* accepted disciples from amongst the so called low caste or depressed classes of the society and greatly compromised with tribal manners and customs, the term 'Moamara' or 'Mayamara' was also used in a derogatory sense. Haliram Dhekial Phukan,⁵⁰ and Maniram Dewan⁵¹ state that

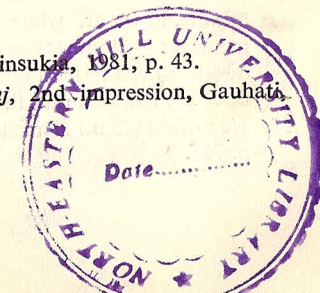
47. Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 326 ff.

48. BVMD.

49. Nomal Gogoi, *Mayamara Sampradai*, Tinsukia, 1981, p. 43.

50. Haliram Dhekial Phukan, *Assam Buranj*, 2nd impression, Gauhati, 1966, p. 96.

51. BVMD.



because of this reason, the other Satras did not keep any relation with the Mayamara *Satra*. Gait mentions that the term 'Moamaria' was a nick-name given to the original disciples Anirudhadeva, who lived near the Moamari lake, used to catch and eat a kind of fish called *Moa*.⁵² Gait's opinion is echoed in the Census Report of 1881 which states that "The Assamese of the lower districts regarded the *Gosain* and his medly following with some contempt, which they expressed by the term 'Moamaria', or catchers of the *Moa* fish, in allusion to the fishing carried on by his *Dom* disciples in the lake on whose bank the *Gosain* had seat."⁵³ *Imperial Gazetteer* also writes in the same vein.⁵⁴ Perhaps, it was this reason that the Mayamara *Mahantas* preferred to designate their *Satra* as Mayamara and repeatedly emphasised that the actual name of their *Satra* was not 'Moamara' but 'Mayamara'.

This resentment amongst the Mayamara *Mahantas* was also occasioned by an interpretation given in the *Hemkosh*, the earliest Assamese dictionary compiled by late Hemchandra Barua that this term denotes cruelty. The dictionary states that the Moamarias or Morans are an aboriginal people of Assam, who had accepted Hinduism. They rose in rebellion in the reigns of Lashmi Singha and Gaurinath Singha and cruelly massacred many people to take revenge on the insults heaped upon their *Mahanta* by queen Phuleswari (which, however, was not a fact). Hence the terms 'Matak', 'Moamaria' or 'Moran' mean very cruel people ("A race in Upper Assam said to be cruel. Hence cruel").⁵⁵ In other words, according to this dictionary the meaning of these terms is cruel. When this came to be known, there was wide resentment not only among the

52. HAG, P. 59.

53. *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881, loc. cit.*, pp. 98.

54. *Imperial Gazetteer of India, loc. cit.*

*Endle, however, while enlisting the sub-tribes of the Kacharis, mentions "Moomara-roi" as "the Mao-fish folk", because the dwellers lived near the Moamari lake. (Endle, *op. cit.*, p. 27). He does not mention that the term was used in a derogatory sense.

55. *Hem-Kosh* (com.) Hemchandra Barua, 4th edition, Sibsagar, 1965, p. 783.

Matak, but also among the Ahoms, who by the term 'Matak' mean, 'a tested powerful person'. In the annual conference of the *All Assam Ahom Sabha*, held at Bhojo in 1946, the members even adopted a resolution demanding a correction of the interpretation given in the dictionary, which was honoured.

Neither the *buranjis*, nor the British records, nor most of the scholars on the field are consistent in using the terms—'Moran', 'Matak', 'Moamaria', or 'Mayamaria'. The *Ahom Buranji*, for example, uses all the three terms,—Matak, Moran and Moamaria including a new term Moamaria—Matak.⁵⁶ While using the first two terms in a synonymous sense, it uses the third term to designate the disciples of the Mayamara *Satradhikar*, whose abode was at Moamara. The term also denotes the rebels, who took arms against the Ahom government. This shows that there were some non-Mataks, who under the banner of the Mataks rose in rebellion against the government.

The *Deodhai Assam Buranji*⁵⁷ uses the term 'Moran' only, whereas, the chronicles incorporated in the *Satsari Assam Buranji*⁵⁸ refer to the terms 'Moran' and 'Matak' in an identical sense. The *Tungkhungia Buranji*,⁵⁹ on the other hand, gives preponderance to the term 'Moran' and uses the term 'Moamaria' while referring to the *Mahanta* (i.e., *Satradhikar*) of the *Satra*. The term 'Matak' finds reference here only on one occasion, while narrating the alliance of the Mataks with the Singphos. Two metrical chronicles *Belimarrar Buranji* and *Kalibharat Buranji* written by Dutiram Hazarika and Bisheswar Vaidyandhip respectively (published under the nomenclature *Asamar Padya Buranji*) use all the three terms synonymously.⁶⁰ Maniram

56. (tr. & ed.) Golap Ch. Barua, *Ahom Buranji*, Calcutta, 1930, pp. 37 f, 293 f, 262 f etc. (henceforth abbreviated as AB.)

57. DAB, pp. 99 ff.

58. SAB, pp. 5, 151, 178 f, etc.

59. Srinath Duara Barbarua, *Tungkhungia Buranji* (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan, 2nd edition, 1964, pp. 56, 70 f, 186 ff, etc. (henceforth abbreviated as TB).

60. *Asamar Padya Buranji* (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan, DHAS, Gauhati, 1933, pp. 80 f, 92, 95, 162, 189, 213, etc. (henceforth abbreviated as TB).

Dewar uses the term 'Moran' to denote a tribe already mentioned and the term 'Matak' to denote the rebels against the Ahom government, who were also disciples of the 'Moamaria Satra'.⁶¹ Haliram Dhekial Phukan uses the term 'Moran' to denote a section of indigenous inhabitants with whom Sukapha had intermarried, and who towards the close of the Ahom rule organised a rebellion against it and created a crisis for the Ahom monarchy. He uses the term 'Moamaria' to denote the *Satra*.⁶²

Most of the modern scholars, including S.K. Bhuyan use the terms 'Mayamara' or 'Moamaria' and 'Matak' in an identical sense. P.N. Gohain Barua means by the term 'Matak' a tribe (i.e. the Moran), who were one of the aboriginal inhabitants of Assam.⁶³ Hiteswar Barbarua, however, refuses to accept the terms 'Mayamara' and 'Mayamaria' to denote the *Satra* and its disciples respectively, as according to him, these terms did not find any reference in any source of the period. But it has already been stated that an official letter of 1802, the Persian transcript of which is still preserved in the National Archives at New Delhi, uses the term 'Mayamara'.

The British officers are not even consistent in spelling the terms mentioned above. J.P. Wade uses the term 'Moran' to mean the rebels and the terms 'Mahamaries' or 'Moamaries' to denote the disciples of the Mayamara *Satra*.⁶⁴ Pemberton and Adam White spell 'Moran' as 'Moram' or 'Morah' and 'Matak' as 'Muttuck' respectively. Buchanon Hamilton uses the term 'Mahamari' to denote the Mayamara *Mahanta*, the spiritual guide of these ruffians "of low origin".⁶⁵ In Robinson's account an abridged form of 'Moamaria' as 'Mora' is found, which, he states, was "the designation of a particular sect of

61. BVMD.

62. Haliram Dhekial Phukan, *op. cit.*, pp. 43 f.

63. P.N. Gohain Barua, *Asamar Buranji*. Reprint, 1976, p. 4.

64. J.P. Wade, *op. cit.*, pp. 42, 152 f, 164 f, etc.

65. Francis Buchanon Hamilton (later Francis Hamilton), *An Account of Assam* (ed.) S.K. Bhuyan, 2nd impression, 1963, pp. 10 f.

the Assamese population."⁶⁶ While some British Officers, as stated, designated the Moamarias as a tribe, some others again referred to them as members of a distinct religious sect. Capt. Hannay, contradicting to the contents of a letter published in the Government Gazette for June, 1825, wherein the Moamarias were referred as a distinct tribe, had emphatically stated that "the Moa Murreahs are not a distinct tribe, but a religious sect of the Assamese population, composed of individuals from most of the known tribes of Assam."⁶⁷ In another letter written by him to Capt. Jenkins, he had stated "the Moamarias living in the Brahmaputra valley on the north bank of the Buri Dihing river are generally called Matak. They are divided into two branches. The branch occupying the upper Dibru region was all Morans, who were also known as Barahi-Morans. They formed an independent tribe under their own chief at the time of Sukapha's invasion of Assam. The other branch lived mainly near the Sessa river; though they were within the Moamaria fold, many Ahoms and other original inhabitants were found among them."^{67a}

The Census Report for 1881 referring to the Matak as "the followers of the Matak *Gosain*" emphatically states that the term 'Matak' does not denote the residents of the country, namely, the Matak Kingdom, but the members of a distinct sect. But the Report also opines that at the relevant time though the Matak were returned as a separate caste, the Census Commissioner had expressed his doubt whether this should have been actually the case.^{67b}

The Matak are also known as *Puranibhakats*. There are three opinions as to why they are called so. According to one opinion, while Aniruddhadeva was going to visit his preceptor

66. Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 326 ff.

67. Capt. S.O. Hannay, 'A Short Account of the Mamorah Sect, and the Country at present occupied by the Bor Senaputtee', *JASB*, August, 1838, pp. 671 ff.

67a. P.C., 1839, Feb. 20, No. 89; Hanny to Jenkins, Jan. 6.

67b. *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*, pp. 98b.

Gopaldeva at Kaljhar* for initiation, he proceeded through an old route to reach the *Satra*, by abandoning the new one constructed in his honour. This had symbolised that Aniruddhadeva would not teach a new tenant but would pursue the old one as taught by the *Guru*. For this, he was called *Puranibhakat* (*purani*—old, *bhakat*—disciple), and his followers also came to be known as *Puranibhakats*.⁶⁸ Another explanation is that Aniruddhadeva's followers consisting mostly of tribal and backward people did not altogether give up their old practices even after their conversion. As they adhered to old customs (*Purani*-old, *pratha*—system), they were called *Puranibhakats*.⁶⁹ But the more convincing explanation is that after the Matak occupied the Ahom throne in 1769, their minister Raha Barbarua ordered the conversion of the non-Moamarias to the Mayamara fold. But the Mayamara *Mahanta* Astabhujadeva restricted the conversion to only those who were not earlier initiated by any *Gosain* or *Mahanta*. These new disciples were called *Natunbhakats* or new disciples, in order to distinguish them from the *Puranibhakats* or old disciples. After the Ahom king was restored to his throne, many of the *Natunbhakats* reverted to their old faith. Thus the term '*Natunbhakat*' disappeared, but the term '*Puranibhakat*' continued.⁷⁰ Although the term did not receive any official recognition, the Matak, in some parts of the country are still referred to as *Puranibhakats*.

From all this we have come to the conclusion that Moran is a tribe, Moamaria or Mayamaria is a sect whose followers are called Moamarias or Mayamarias and Matak is a community, which included all the disciples of the Mayamara *Satra* belonging to different castes, tribes and professional groups. It was not from the name of their kingdom that the Matak were so called, but it was they who named their kingdom as such, namely, the Matak kingdom. As the

*Kaljhar was situated on the east of Purula river near Bhawanipur in lower Assam.

68. ACMSV, p. 16; S.N. Sarma, *The Satra and the Satra Institution of Assam*, Gauhati University, 1966.

69. S.N. Sarma, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

70. G. Barua, *op. cit.*, p. 106; CBMR, pp. 63 f.

Satradhikars prefer to call their *Satras* as 'Mayamara', we would also be, in our work, referring to the *Satra* and its *Mahantas* as such, but while referring to the disciples we would use the term 'Moamaria' following the *buranjis* and the British records of the period. In this work also the terms 'Matak' and 'Moamaria' would be used synonymously, but the term 'Moran' would always denote a particular tribe.

Composition of the Matak Community :

We would now discuss, in brief, the racial origin and political background of the different tribes and castes composing the Matak community, highlighting only those points as would be essential in better appreciating our problem.

The Morans : They were the first among the tribes to accept initiation from the Mayamara *Mahanta*. They were also the most dominant among the Mayamara disciples. The Ahoms and also the Singphos and the Khamtis, at a later period, referred to them as 'Matak', the implication of which term has already been discussed. On the basis of their racial and linguistic affinities, the Morans are ascribed Bodo origin. Gait, in his Report, *Census of India, Assam, 1891* mentions that the Morans had a language of their own, which was allied to the Kacharis, but they gradually abandoned it in favour of Assamese.⁷¹ Further, in the *History of Assam*⁷² Gait emphatically states that the Moran language was undoubtedly Bodo. P.R.T. Gurdon, furnishes some concrete linguistic evidences to prove the affinity of the Moran language with that of the Bodos,⁷³ (see, Appendix A). The views of Gait and Gurdon are also supported by scholars like Endle and Grierson. Endle assumes that the Morans originated from Mongkong (Maingkhwang) in the Hukong Valley, at the upper reaches of the Chindwin river. A few centuries ago, three brothers named

71. *Census of India 1891, loc. cit.*, pp. 236 f.

72. HAG, p. 78.

73. Major P.R.T. Gurdon, 'Notes on the Morans' *JASB*, Vol. LXXIII, Part I, No. I, pp. 36 ff.

Moylang, Moran and Moyran inhabited there. While the eldest of them remained there, the youngest, Moyran migrated to Nepal, and the second one Moran, crossed the Patkai range, entered Assam and settled near the Tiphuk river. According to him the descendants of Moran came to be known by his name. They are also sometimes called *Habungiyas* i.e., earth-folk, meaning true autochthones or the sons of the soil.⁷⁴ Pemberton is of opinion that the Morans are identical with the Noras who, as pointed out by Hamilton, inhabited the Dihing valley.⁷⁵ Endle's story of the migration of the ancestor of the Moran people from the Hukong valley and Pemberton's assertion that the Morans are identified with the Noras, meaning the people of Mungkong indicate that the original homeland of these people was somewhere in western China on the valley of the Yang-tse-Kiang and the Howang-Ho.

Grierson, confirming language affinities of the Morans with the Bodos states thus,

To complete the survey of this (Bodo) group, we may mention Moran, a language which is believed to be now extinct.....Their language belonged to the Bodo group, but they have nearly abandoned it in favour of Assamese.⁷⁶

Assamese scholars like Rajani Kanta Bordoloi⁷⁷, and B.K. Barua⁷⁸ also support the Bodo origin of the Morans. B.K. Barua, following Endle, holds that the original home of the Bodo people (including the Morans) was in western China near the Yang-tse-Kiang and the Howang-Ho rivers.⁷⁹ Benudhar Sarma and following him Biradhar Das, however, do not accept the Bodo origin of the Morans. They are in a tendency to

74. Endle, *op. cit.*, pp. 87 f 115.

75. Pemberton, *op. cit.*, pp. 70 f.

76. G.A. Grierson, 'Assamese Burmese Branch', *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol' I, Part I, Reprint, Delhi, 1973, p. 65.

77. R.K. Bordoloi, in ACMSV, pp. 1, 221.

78. B.K. Barua, *A cultural History of Assam* (Early Period) Vol. I, Gamhar, 2nd edition, 1969, p. 7.

79. B.K. Barua, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

ascribe them Aryan origin.⁸⁰ But their contention does not rest on a strong foundation against the established fact that the Morans are a Bodo tribe.

Linguistic affinity, physical features and other common characteristics of the Morans with the rest of the Bodos evidence their origin from this race. It is generally held that the original home of the Bodos was near the headwaters of the Yang-tse-Kiang and the Howang-Ho rivers, to the west of China from which place they started to move south and west, probably from 2000 B.C. onwards. They infiltrated into India mostly along the western course of the Brahmaputra. The great Bodo tribe would appear to have been established over the valley of the Brahmaputra fairly early, and to have extended into the North and East Bengal and thence into North-Bihar.⁸¹ The Morans who perhaps came a little later than the earliest stream of the Bodos, occupied a part of the extreme eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley, vacated by their predecessors. Therefore, the date of their immigration may be a little later than that suggested by S.K. Chatterjee as 2000 B.C. Thus there is no denying the fact the Morans are one of the aboriginal people of the Bramaputra valley.

The Morans, along with the Barahis, were also the first tribe, whom Sukapha (1228-1260), the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam, had to encounter, in course of his march to the Brahmaputra valley. At the time of Sukapha's advent, the Morans were ruling in the tract bounded by the rivers Buri Dihing in the north, Disang in the south, Suffry in the east and Brahmaputra in the west.⁸² Though they then lay scattered within this area, still they were united under their chief Badaucha,^{83*} who had his headquarters at Kaktal.⁸⁴ Sukapha

80. B. Sarma, *loc. cit.*; B. Das, *loc. cit.*

81. S.K. Chatterjee, *The Place of Assam in the history and civilisation of India*, p. 9; *Kirata-Jana-Kriti*, Second edition, 1974, pp. 45 f.

82. *Buragohain Vamsavali* (MS).

83. HKB, p. 12; HAG, p. 78.

*According to some chronicles Thakumtha was the chief of both the Morans, and Barahis. (SAB, p. 5; DAB, p. 100).

84. Extract of an old chronicle published in the *Lik Phan Tai*; HKB, p. 12; Endle, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

won over the Moran chief by diplomatic means.⁸⁵ Those sections of the Morans, who refused to surrender, were compelled to do so by force. According to *Purani Asam Buranji*, the headmen of these families were invited to participate in a feast, they were then made intoxicated and killed by Sukapha's men.⁸⁶ Sukapha gradually managed to engage the Morans as fuel-suppliers and orchard-keepers.⁸⁷ He also opened three *khats* (gardens or cornfields) at Gachikala, Barakhowa and Engera and engaged many Morans in clearing lands for the purpose.⁸⁸ In his dealings with the Morans and the Barahis, Sukapha was assisted by Thao-mung-Kling-lun-mung-rai Buragohain and Thao-mung-Kan Borgohain, who acted as his two ministers.

Sukapha received converts from the Morans. Thus while at Tipam by the side of the Dihing river, he was impressed by a Moran who used to supply him brinjals. Sukapha named him Lanmakkhru, as brinjals in Anom language is called *Makkhru*.⁸⁹ Lanmakkhru also rendered him great help in fighting the Nagas. In appreciation of this, Sukapha accepted him into the Ahom fold. Lanmakkhru became the progenitor of a distinct Ahom *Phoid* or clan named after him. Haladhi Thenga and Bandar, who were the Borphukans or Governors of Lower Assam in the reigns of Pratap Singha (1603-1641) and Sulikpha Lara Raja (1679-1681) respectively, were descendants of this clan.⁹⁰ Sukapha accepted another Moran, Maimai Khiarat, a weigher by profession, from Tipam, to his fold. His family was subsequently made *Patar* by Sukhapha Khora Raja (1553-1603). Later on, a family of this clan was taken to

85. SAB, p. 6 ; DAB, pp. 100 f.

86. PAB, p. 14.

87. HKB, pp. 12 f ; KTP, p. 10.

88. HKB, p. 13 ; KTP, p. 10.

89. PAB, pp. 38 f ; *An account of Ahom Phoids and Clans*, Tr. No. 131, Vol. XIV, Part II, p. 35.

90. S. Rajkumar, *Itihase Suara Sushata Bachar*, Jorhat, 1980, p. 73 (henceforth abbreviated as ISSB).

Tingkhang as *Hatimuria* by Chaupet Buragohain.⁹¹ These new families were thoroughly assimilated with the old Ahoms. Offices and privileges enjoyed by the latter were made open to them.

Thaururu, the Buragohain of Subimpha (1281-1293), who having lost his way, while making an investigation in the neighbourhood of the Moran area, took shelter there and married a Moran girl and had two sons by her. After his death, when the secret was made known to the Ahom king, he appointed the elder son as the Buragohain and the younger one as Moran Gohainbarua i.e., the Governor of the Moran area.^{92*}

In the reign of Suhungmung or the Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) the descendants of the Moran and Barahi chiefs were established in responsible positions in different parts of the kingdom, such as, Chargua, Paibela, Dihing, Janji, Bagh-chau, Langkak, etc.^{93**}

91. AB, p. 36 ; PAB, pp. 30 f.

92. *Moran Buragohain and Moran Gonainbarua Vamsawali* ; P. Gohainbaru, *op. cit.*, pp. 33 f.

*Tharuru Buragohain married Dabuka, the daughter of the Moran chief and had two sons by her, Thabuk and Bakul. At the time of his death, the Buragohain handed over his *Hengdan* (the insignia of Ahom nobility) inserted in a bamboo pole. Thabuk supplied fuel to the royal household along with other Morans, but did not hand over the bamboo pole that he used to carry the fuel-loads, while the others surrendered theirs with the fuel-loads. One day in a tug-of-war for the bamboo pole between the royal cooks and Thabuk, the *Hengdan* was discovered. The secret of the *Hengdan* was revealed by the mother of Thabuk when she was summoned to the court. Being convinced, the King appointed the sons of the Buragohain as mentioned above. Certain chronicles, however, state that the Buragohain married not with the daughter of the Moran chief but with that of an ordinary Moran, and that he had only one son, who was subsequently made the Buragohain. (DAB, pp. 105, 211 ; SAB, pp. 10, 47 ; PAB, p. 15).

93. SAB, p. 15.

**P. Gogoi locates Chargua up the river Dhola and near Dihing where Sudangpha, a later Ahom king (1397-1407) built his capital. (P. Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdom*, Gauhati University, 1968, p. 275). Excepting one or two places mentioned above, all other sites are still in existence.

When the Ahom kingdom was further extended towards the west, many officers of the Ahom administration were recruited from amongst the Morans. Even some top-ranking officers like that of the Borpatragohain⁹⁴ were recruited from the Morans. Moreover, as Moran people were expert in catching and training elephants, the Ahom elephantry was practically monopolised by them. Because they were brave warriors, they also contributed a major share to the man-power of the Ahom army. Thus the service of the Morans was of great help in the expansion and consolidation of the Ahom power in Assam.

The Barahis : The Barahis were another Bodo tribe, who lived near the Morans. It is not definitely known as to why they were called so. According to some member of the Barahi elderfolk, whom I interviewed, they are called Barahis, because originally they were worshipper of *Varaha*, an incarnation of god Vishnu. Madhav Kandali, a noted Assamese literary figure of the 14th century, acknowledges his gratitude to his patron, the Barahi King Mahamanikya, who ruled over the Kapili valley.⁹⁵ From this it appears that the different families of the Barahis were ruling in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley. But in course of time, they were overshadowed by some other powerful tribe like the Chutiyas and the Kacharis. A section of the Barahis still introduces themselves as Barahi-Chutiyas, from which, it appears that they were a clan or division of the Chutiyas.

At the time of Sukapha's advent to Assam, a branch of the Barahis was ruling in the tract bounded by the river Disang in the north, river Dikhow in the south, Nagahat in the east and Barahi-fika in the west.⁹⁶ Their chief was Thakumtha or Thamithuma,⁹⁷ who had his capital at the Charaideo hill.

94. ACMSV, p. 47 ; AARB, p. 200.

95. Hemchandra Goswami, *Descriptive Catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts*, Calcutta University, 1930, p. 139.

96. *Buragohain Vamsawali* (MS)

97. HKB, p. 12 ; HAC, p. 78.

According to some chronicles, Thakumtha was the chief of both the Morans and the Barahis.⁹⁸ As Sukapha, on grounds of political expediency, was pursuing a policy of peace and conciliation towards the conquered people, he won over the Barahis also by diplomatic means. He intermarried with these people as well,⁹⁹ and appointed them as cooks, store-keepers, poultry-farm managers, physicians, etc.¹⁰⁰ The Barahis had such proficiency in cooking that royal cooks were always appointed from amongst them.¹⁰¹ Members of the Barahis were also accepted to the Ahom fold and given responsible offices.

Following the Morans, they accepted initiation from the Mayamara *Mahanta*.

The Chutiyas : Next to the Morans, the most dominant members of the Matak community, were the Chutiyas. The origin of the name 'Chutiya' cannot be definitely ascertained. According to Benudhar Sarma, these people had their abode on the bank of the river Swatee, which flowed through Vidarbha (which he identifies with the Sadiya area), and for this, they were called 'Swateas' corrupted into Chutiyas or Chutiyas.¹⁰² But the existence of such a river in the area mentioned by Sarma is doubtful. R.M. Nath writes in a similar strain. According to him, there was a kingdom known as Chutan in the north-eastern region of the Brahmaputra valley, which may be identified with modern Arunachal. The people of that kingdom were called Chutiyas.¹⁰³ The existence of a kingdom known by that name in that area is yet to be proved. Hence his theory that the term 'Chutiya' originates from 'Chutan' is doubtful.

Whatever the origin of the term 'Chutiya' might be, there

98. SAB, p. 5.

99. SAB, p. 6 ; DAB, p. 100.

100. HKB, pp. 12 f ; KTP, p. 10.

101. PAB, p. 14.

102. B. Sarma, 'Chutia Culture' (in Assamese), *Souvenir, All Assam Chutiya Sanmilan, Golden Jubilee Issue*, 1974, p. 2.

103. R.M. Nath, 'Archaeology of the Chutiya Race' (in Assamese), *Souvenir, All Assam Chutiya Sanmilan*, p. 10.

is no denying the fact that like the Morans and the Barahis, they were also a Bodo tribe, speaking a language, which had close affinity with that of the Kacharis. According to W.B. Brown, the Chutiya language "may fairly claim to be the original language of Upper Assam",¹⁰⁴ which is now spoken by the Deoris, the priestly class of the Chutiyas.¹⁰⁵ P.R.T. Gurdon even provides a list of Deori-Chutiya and Kachari words to show their inter-linguistic relationship,¹⁰⁶ (see, Appendix B). Linguistic affinities well-evidence that the Chutiyas were a branch of the vast Bodo tribe. From the physical appearance of the Chutiyas, Gait opines "they have in their frames a considerable infusion of Shan blood....."¹⁰⁷ This may be possible because the Chutiyas were the next neighbours of the Shans of south-east Asia.¹⁰⁸

Assamese scholars are of one accord that the Chutiyas were the authors of the Kundil civilisation. They rose into power towards the later part of the 12th century or even earlier. According to P. Saikia, a modern researcher on the Chutiyas, the Chutiya kingdom was bounded by the Himalayas on the north, river Buri Dihing on the south, Patkai ranges in the east and Bharali river in the west.¹⁰⁹ Robinson¹¹⁰ and following him, N.N. Acharyya,¹¹¹ are of opinion that the Chutiya kingdom extended upto Viswanath in the present Darrang district of Assam. The Ahoms called the Chutiyas, Tiura.¹¹² According

104. W.B. Brown, *An Outline Grammar of the Deori-Chutiya Language*, Introduction, p. III.

105. Endle, *op. cit.*, p. 4; E.T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1879 (now entitled) *Tribal History of Eastern India*, Delhi, 1973, pp. 77 ff; *The Assam District Gazetteers*, Sibsagar, 1905; CBMR, p. 4.

106. P.R.T. Gurdon, *loc. cit.*, pp. 36 ff.

107. HAG, p. 40.

108. *Ibid.*

109. P. Saikia, *Deori-Chutiya*, Jorhat, 1974, pp. 2 ff.

110. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

111. N.N. Acharyya, *The History of Medieval Assam*, Gauhati, 1966, p. 232.

112. CBMR, p. 14.

to an Assamese chronicle, the Chutiya kingdom, at the advent of the Ahoms, was bounded by the mountain (meaning the Himalayas) in the north, Buri Dihing in the south, Brahmaputra in the east and river, Sisi, a branch of the Subansiri, on the west.¹¹³ According to an old *buranji* both the Morans and the Barahis were subordinate to the ruling tribe, the Chutiyas,¹¹⁴ which may not be impossible.

A section of the Chutiyas who came to be identified as Hindu-Chutiyas was Aryanised at a very early period. Indeed it appears that of all the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley, the Chutiyas were the most advanced and had a well-developed civilisation. The *Chutiya buranji* states that Gauri Narayan or Ratnadhvaj Pal (c 1224-1259), the greatest of their kings could make his power felt as far as Gaur and compel the king of Kamata to give his daughter in marriage to his son.¹¹⁵ The Ahoms avoided any confrontation with the Chutiyas, till they could strongly organise themselves. In 1376, the Chutiya King Sankhadhwaj Pal (c 1364-99) invited the Ahom king Sutupha (1364-1376) to witness a boat-rowing competition in the Suffry river within his kingdom and treacherously killed him.¹¹⁶ To avenge this, the next Ahom king Tyaokhamti (1380-1389), led an expedition to the Chutiya kingdom, but without any effect.¹¹⁷ The Chutiya power began to decline with the beginning of the 16th century. Taking advantage of an anarchical condition in the Chutiya kingdom under the rule of an inefficient king Dhir Narayan (c 1504-1523), the Ahom King Suhungnung or the Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) annexed the Chutiya kingdom in 1523, and appointed an officer called Sadiya Khowa Gohain to govern the territory. The annexation so greatly increased the workload that the office of the third minister namely, that of the Borpatragohain in Ahom

113. *Buragohain Vamsawali* (MS)

114. Assamese Manuscript incorporated in Ney Elias'—*Introductory Sketch of the History of the Shans in Upper Burma and Western Yunnan*, Calcutta, 1876, pp. 61 f; N.N. Acharyya, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

115. W.B. Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 78 f; N.N. Acharyya, *op. cit.*, pp. 235 f.

116. N.N. Acharyya, *op. cit.*, p. 236; HKB., p. 15.

117. AB, p. 49.

administration had to be created. Suhungmung scattered the Chutiya nobles in different parts of his kingdom, so as to prevent an organised rebellion from them.¹¹⁸ Still then the Chutiyas continued to rebel till the close of the 16th century.¹¹⁹ The Ahoms accepted many Chutiyas to their fold and offered them responsible offices in the administration. Langi Panisiya, the first Borphukan, was a Chutiya by caste.¹²⁰ The founders of noted Ahom families like those of Chetia and Lahon were Chutiyas.¹²¹

The Chutiya war brought not only large annexation of territory to the Ahom kingdom, but also brought groups of people proficient in different technical skills, such as blacksmiths, goldsmiths, weavers etc.¹²² Henceforth, the Chutiyas were engaged in all technical jobs of the Ahom kingdom. For example, the *Khanikar Khel* (guild of engineers) was always manned by the Chutiyas. The *Japi-sajiya Khel* (guild for making *Japis*) was also monopolised by them. The Chutiyas being expert warriors, knew the use of matchlocks. After their subjugation, the Chutiyas were, therefore, engaged in manufacturing matchlocks and they became prominent in the *Hiloidari Khel* (guild for manufacturing matchlocks). Besides, items of Chutiya aristocracy like the *Danda-Chhatra* (royal umbrella), *Arwan**, *Kekura-dola* (Palaquin), embroidered-*japi* etc., were adopted by the Ahoms.¹²³ The Chutiya kingdom had also several salt-springs at places like Borhat, which came under the Ahoms after its annexation.

Those Chutiyas, who were not Hinduised and lived in the neighbourhood of the Mayamara *Satra*, accepted initiation.

118. SAB, pp. 13 f ; HAG, pp. 87 ff.

119. N.N. Acharyya, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

120. PAB, p. 31.

121. *Ibid.* ; pp. 29 f.

122. SAB, p. 14.

*Arwan—an insignia of authority circular in shape made of wicker—work covered with embroidered silk or cotton case, used by the king, the three great nobles and the three frontier governors.

123. SAB, p. 14.

from its *Mahanta* and came to be known as Matak-Chutiya. At present the Matak-Chutiyas are mostly the disciples of the Tiphuk Mayamara *Mahantas*. There is a clan among the Chutiyas, known as Buruk-Chutiya, who are also disciples of the Mayamara *Satra*. The Buruk-Chutiyas, according to P. Saikia, are the direct descendants of the Chutiya royal family. Sarbananda Singha, the ruler of the Matakas, is said to be a Buruk-Chutiya by caste.¹²⁴

The Kacharis : The Kacharis are perhaps the earliest known indigenous inhabitants of Assam. They are genuine Bodos and are still called so in the Brahmaputra valley. In the North-Cachar Hills, they are called 'Dimachas', meaning, sons of the big river. The Ahoms refer to them as 'Tinisa', obviously a corruption of the word 'Diamacha'. In the Brahmaputra valley the Kacharis call themselves 'Bodo' or 'Bodo-fisa' (meaning sons of the 'Bodo'). The Kacharis are identical with the people called Mech, in Goalpara and North Bengal.¹²⁵

The origin of the word 'Kachari' is still a matter of conjecture, and inference. According to the Limbu legend of creation, mentioned by Risley, "one of the two progenitors of human race settled in the *Khachar country*, which is the name given by the Nepalese to the tract at the foot of the hills between the Brahmaputra and the Kosi rivers, and there became the father of the Koch, Mech and Dhimal tribes."¹²⁶ Waddell, echoing a similar view, says that the term 'Kachari' is an 'Indian term' denoting an inhabitant of the *Kachha* or sub-mountain marshy tracts.¹²⁷ The opinion that the present district of Cachar gave the name 'Kachari' to these people cannot be accepted. "They are known by that name in many parts far removed from Cachar, and were so called long before

124. P. Saikia, *op. cit.*, pp. 2 ff.

125. HAG, p. 299 ; N.N. Acharyya, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

126. H.H. Risely, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1872, p. 247 ; HAG (Reprint, 1967), p. 299.

127. L.A. Waddell, *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, Delhi, Reprint, 1975, pp. 44 f.

a section of the tribe took possession of that district."¹²⁸ It is, therefore, possible that Cachar, the present district of Assam, got its name from the Kachari people themselves, who formed a principal tribe of the region.

When the Ahoms came to Assam, the Kacharis were ruling over an extensive territory west of the Morans and the Barahis on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. Their kingdom also stretched half-way across the modern Nowgong district and included about three-fourths of the present Sibsagar district.¹²⁹ They have left traces of their domination over this tract in the nomenclature of some of the places and rivers. The Bodo equivalent for water is di, which forms the first syllable of the names of the chief rivers of eastern Assam, such as, Dihong, Dibang, Disang, Dibru, Dihing, Dikrong, Dikhow, etc.¹³⁰

The Ahoms had their first encounter with the Kacharis in the reign of Suteupha (1268—1281), who drove the latter to the west of the river Dikhow. But in 1490, they suffered a defeat while attempting to push further at the cost of the Kacharis and sued for peace,¹³¹ Thenceforth the Ahoms pursued a policy backed by both diplomacy and force in their dealings with this tribe. The powerful king Suhugmung or the Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) occupied the Kachari territory upto the river Dhansiri including their capital at Dimapur, compelled them to retreat further south to the present districts of Cachar and North Cachar ; and declared their king as "thapita-sanchita" *i.e.*, established and protected by Ahoms.¹³² This king created offices of Marangikhowa Gohain to govern the lower valley of the Dhansiri and Rahial Barua to watch the movements of the Kacharis in the Kapili valley. The Kacharis did not accept the Ahom subordination and made repeated attempts

128. HAG, pp. 299 f ; N.N. Acharyya, *op. cit.*, pp. 213 f.

129. L. Devi, *Ahom-Tribal Relations*, Gauhati, 1968, p. 77 ; HAG (Reprint, 1967), p. 300.

130. Endle, *op. cit.*, pp. 1 ff ; N.N. Acharyya, *op. cit.*, pp. 216 f.

131. HAG p. 301 ; Devi, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

132. HAG p. 301 ; Devi, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

to assert their independence. The Kachari king Krishnachandra Narayan (c 1790-1830) lent support to the Matak rebels and refused to send the Matak refugees from his kingdom, which resulted in a war in 1803, where the Kacharis and their Matak allies were decisively defeated by the Ahoms.¹³³

In spite of continued warfare between the Kacharis and the Ahom kings, a great number of Kachari people remained within the Ahom kingdom. The Ahoms received many Kacharis to their fold, and sometimes appointed them to the highest offices in the administration. For example, in the reign of Rudra Singha (1696-1714) a Kachari held the post of Borgohain.¹³⁴

The rivers in the area occupied from the Kacharis were abounded with gold-particles ; the Kacharis were therefore, proficient in extracting gold by washing sands of the rivers. When they became subjects of the Ahom kingdom, they were therefore, appointed as gold-washers and organised into a *Sonowal Khel*. These Kacharis came to be known as Sonowal Kacharis.

A large number of Kachari became disciples of the Mayamara *Satras*. They introduced themselves as Matak Kacharis.

The Ahoms : The Ahoms are the members of the Tai or Shan section of the Siamese-Chinese branch of the Sino-Tibetans.¹³⁵ They emigrated to Assam in the early part of the 13th century. It is said that the term 'Ahom' is a corruption of the Sanskrit word 'Assam' meaning 'unparalleled', which was applied to the Shan invaders by the subjugated Barahis.¹³⁶ Subsequently, the term 'Asama' or 'Asam' or 'Assam' used to

133. TB, p. 149 ; SAB, pp. 179 ff ; HAG, p. 309 ; Devi, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

134. AB, p. 31 ; Devi, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

135. Waddell, *op. cit.*, p. 17 ; Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 159 ; Grierson, *op. cit.*, p. 59 ; HAG, p. 70 ; AARB, p. 2 ; S.K. Chatterjee, *Kirata-Jana-Kriti*, pp. 51, 102 ; P. Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdom*, pp. 1 ff ; Lila Gogoi, "The Tai, their origin and branches", *The Tai Khamtis*, Chowkbam, 1971, pp. 1 ff.

136. HKB, pp. 12 f.

denote the country inhabited by these people. According to another opinion, the term 'Ahom' has been derived from the Tai word 'Ao-Hom' meaning to 'get-together',¹³⁷ which refers to Sukapha's free mixing with the local tribes and adding to the numerical strength of his followers with converts from among these people. But it is more probable that the term comes from the Bodo word 'A-Shan' (Shan), meaning the land of the Shans,¹³⁸ which was later applied to the people as well, and corrupted into 'Ahom' (Ahan/Aham) as the sibilant 's' (sh) used to be pronounced by the Tai-Shans as the aspirit 'h'.¹³⁹

Before their conversion to Hinduism, the Ahoms were animists adhering to Taoism. They worshipped a number of gods whom they propitiated with sacrifices and offerings.¹⁴⁰ Their tutelary deity was Chom-Cheng, whose worship was believed to bring peace and prosperity and defeat of the enemy.¹⁴¹ Sukapha was accompanied by his priests—*Deodhais* and *Bailungs*. In course of time, they came under the pale of Hinduism, which afterwards so much overruled them that their traditional priests were reduced to insignificance, and some of later Ahom monarchs became more concerned with observing religious rites than performing their state-duties. The Ahom religious policy would be discussed in relevant places of this work.

Although the Ahom royalty, since the beginning, adopted in general, a hostile attitude towards the Mayamara *Satra*, many Ahom commoners, nay even members of the Ahom nobility, accepted initiation from the Mayamara *Mahanta*. This had greatly increased the strength and power of the *Satra*. These disciples, some of whom were also in the service of the government, divulged military secrets of royalist side and thereby

137. Bimalakanta Barua, *Tai Bhasha*, Jorhat, 1974, p. 3.

138. P. Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdom*, p. 269.

139. HAG, p. Appendix G.

140. P. Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdom*, pp. 523 ff.

141. AARB, p. 17.

contributed to the success of the Matak Rebellion.¹⁴²

The Kaivartas: The Kaivartas are one of the early inhabitants of Assam.* They might have immigrated to Assam from neighbouring countries of Bengal and Bihar.¹⁴³ Indian classical writers made mention of them as offsprings of a *Nishada* father and an *Ayogava* mother.¹⁴⁴ According to the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, a Kaivartra was born of a Kshatriya father and a Vaishya mother.¹⁴⁵ The Buddhist Jatakas refer to a class of fishermen who worked with nets and baskets and were called Kevattas.¹⁴⁶ It is held by some that the term 'Kaivarta' is a Sanskritised form of this Prakrit 'Kevatta'.

Gait,¹⁴⁷ Robinson¹⁴⁸ and others allude Dravidian origin to the Kaivartas of Assam. This origin of the Kaivartas is supported by their still-retaining some prominent Dravidian traits.

The Kaivartas were generally known in Assam as '*Doms*', and by this term they are referred to in all Assamese chronicles. But they now consider this appellation as derogatory and introduce themselves by the Sanskrit appellation 'Kaivarta'. They were also called *Nadials*, meaning one who lived in the river side, which evidences the fact that fishing being the main occupation of the Kaivartas, they were required to live on the banks of the rivers. They are still prominent in the population of Assam.

142. BVMD.

*Even in the ancient period a few Kaivartas held administrative offices. The Tezpur Rock Inscription of Harjaravarman (c. 820—836 A.D.) refers to a Kaivarta, who was in charge of collecting State-toll on the rivers. (K.L. Barua, *op. cit.*, p. 115).

143. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

144. Manu-*Manusamhita*, Ch. X, 4,

145. Chapter X, 34.

146. Social Glienderung, Tr., p. 392 (cf. B.K. Barua, *op. cit.*, p. 114).

147. HAG, p. 2.

148. Robinson, p. 263.

The Kaivartas had their own priests and formed a distinct class in the society. Their professional and sectarian identities fostered in them a strong community feeling, for which they were considered as potential enemies by the Ahom government.¹⁴⁹ In the social stratification they were put in the lowest ladder.

The Kaivartas were attracted easily towards neo-Vaisnavism, particularly towards the Mayamara *Satra*, which uplifted the oppressed and down-trodden backward classes by giving them equal status with the disciples of the higher caste. Besides, the democratic organisation of the *Satras* not only honoured their community feeling but created conditions for its further development. Still now, a sizeable section of the disciples of the Mayamara *Satras* belongs to the Kaivartas.

H.R. Dhekial Phukan informs us that the Ahom king distinguished the Kaivartas by putting the mark of a fish on their foreheads, as the latter, disguising themselves as men of superior rank, were found to intermarry with the higher castes of the society.^{150*} But what is more probable is that the Ahoms considered the Kaivartas, who were disciples of the Mayamara *Satras*, as their enemies, as they were suspected of propagating revolutionary ideas among the people.

The Kaivartas took a very active part in the Matak Rebellion. One of them named Haidhan (Haridhan) even challenged the Ahom King Gaurinath Singha when he was at Gauhati, after being driven out from his capital at Rangpur by the Matak insurgents, and compelled to leave his Gauhati camp.¹⁵¹ Another assumed independent power about the same period near Sadiya.¹⁵²

149. S.L. Barua, *Rajmantri Purnananda Buragohain and His Times* (Ph. D. Thesis).

150. H.R. Dhekial Phukan, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

*Maniram Dewan, however, states that it was Purnananda Buragohain, the Ahom Premier, who did so. (BVMD).

151. TB. p. 125.

152. Capt. S.O. Hannay, *loc. cit.*, pp. 67 ff.

The Brahmanas (Brahmins) : Assam came into contact with Aryan culture at a very early period. Even legendary kings like Naraka and Bhagadatta are credited with the establishment of Brahmanas in the land.¹⁵³ The influence of Kamarupa over north-eastern India, after the fall of the Imperial Guptas in the later part of the 5th century A.D., caused the migration of a large number of Brahmanas to Kamarupa.¹⁵⁴ The kings of ancient Assam adopted a systematic policy of establishing the Brahmanas in their kingdoms by *Agrahara* landgrants. The earliest reference to this is noticed in the *Nidhanpur* plates, by which Bhaskarvarman confirmed the landgrants made by his predecessor Bhutivarman (c 510-555 A.D.) to more than 200 Brahmana families in North Bengal.^{155*} The later kings including the Koches and the Ahoms continued to patronise the Brahmanas.

The social organisation of the Brahmanas was distinguished by *rotas* and *Vedasakhas*.¹⁵⁶ The Brahmanas of Assam traced their descent from the Brahmanas of Kanyakubja (Kanauj), and followed the Mithila School in matters relating to inheritance, marriage, worship, sacrifice, performance of daily *sandhya* prayers, etc.¹⁵⁷

In the *Satras* of the Brahmanical order, the Brahmanas continued their social importance and the hierarchy as being at the top of the ladder, but their counterparts, who became disciples of the Mayamara *Satras*, greatly lost their prestige and position. They were placed on an equal footing with the *Sudra* or non-Brahmana disciples, which included the tribals.

153. K.L. Barua, *Early History of Kamarupa*, 2nd edition, Gauhati, 1966, p. 14.

154. B.K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, (Early period), Vol. I, Nowgong, 1951, p. 104.

155. *Ibid.*

*The creation of *Agraharas* for Brahmins of various *gotras* is also found in the epigraphs, such as, Tezpur Grant, v. 30 ; Nowgong Grant, v. 26 ; Sualkuchi Grant, v. 16 ; Gauhati Grant, v. 26, etc.

156. B.K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, p. 104.

157. *Ibid.*, (2nd edition), Gauhati, 1969, p. 119.

Although the Matak Brahmanas continued to perform the Vedic rites, they had to give more emphasis on Mayamara religious scriptures and performance of *Gayan-bayan*, so that the Brahmanic rituals among them were reduced to a negligible proportion. It was possibly for this reason that Maniram Dewan remarked that the Brahmanas of the *Kalasambati Satras*, which included mainly the Mayamara and Dihing *Satras*, did not observe the *Sandhya-Gayatri*^{158*}. The number of Brahmanas in the Matak community is of course very few.

The Kayasthas: They are of Aryan stock and came to Assam from Videha (Mithila) and Kanauj along with the Brahmanas and later also from Bengal. The kings of ancient Assam established both Brahmanas and Kayasthas in their kingdom. They enjoyed a high social status and worked as officers and scribes under the kings of ancient Assam as well as under the Ahom rule. In the later period, during the reign of Durlabh Narayan (1330-1350), a few families of Kayasthas were established in the western part of the Brahmaputra valley. Among these Kayasthas was Chandibar, the great grand-father of Sankardeva, the founder of the neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam.¹⁵⁹ Many of the Vaisnava reformers including Aniruddhadeva, the founder of the Mayamara *Satra*,¹⁶⁰ were Kayasthas. In the Matak community, however, except the families of the *Satradhikars*, there is no other Kayasths.

The Kalitas: The Kalitas occupied an important place in the medieval Assamese society. According to popular tradition, the Kalitas were Kshatriyas, who fled to the forest of Assam to escape the wrath of Parasuram, who was determined to exterminate the Kshatriyas. So they came to be known as *Kula-lupta* (*Kula-caste, lupta-gone*), which term was later

158. BVMD.

*This view of course, has been denied by the Brahmanas of this sect.

159. Ramcharan Thakur, *Sankar Charit*; P. Gohainbarua, *op. cit.*, pp. 13 ff; HAG, pp. 40 f.; R.M. Nath, *op. cit.*, 55.

160. ACMSV, pp. 6 f.

corrupted into Kalita,¹⁶¹ thereby implying a degraded caste.* On the basis of this tradition the Kalitas claim themselves to be Kayasthas and hence of Aryan origin. But according to most of the scholars, the Kalitas were Vratyas or Alpines, who entered Assam before the Aryans.¹⁶⁵ Waddell noticed slight Mougoloid traits in some of them,¹⁶³ which was evidently due to their interfusion with the Mongoloid tribes in later times.

The Kalitas were distributed all over Assam, and they monopolised most of the trades and professions of the land. They were divided into two classes—*Barkalitas* and *Sarukalitas*. The *Barkalitas* acted as scribes, traders or merchants. When the *Satra* institution was established, some of them also became *Satradhikars*. The *Sarukalitas* were professionals, which included the blacksmiths (*Kamar-Kalita*), goldsmith (*Sunari-Kalita*), bell-metal workers (*Kanhar Kalita*), potters (*Kumar-Kalita*), washermen (*Dhoba-Kalita*), dancers (*Nat-Kalita*), etc.

Tradition speaks of a Kalita kingdom,¹⁶⁴ which was situated at a distance of 40 days journey from Sadiya. The biography of Bhavanipuria Gopal Ata (1541-1611 A.D.), a disciple of Sankardeva, mentions of a Kalita kingdom that lay to the north-east of 'Achama' (Assam) and near the region inhabited by the hill-tribes like the Mishings and the Adis*.¹⁶⁵

161. *Assam District Gazetteers*, Sibsagar district, p. 91.

*Since the very historicity of Parasuram is doubtful, who is placed both in *Treta* and *Dwapara Yugas*, the mythological interpretation of the word 'Kalita' cannot be accepted, (For details, see B.K. Kakati, *Kalita Jatir Itibritta*, 2nd publication, Gauhati, 1962, pp. 45 ff.

162. K.L. Barua, 'Alpines in Eastern India', *Studies in the Early History of Assam* (ed.) M. Neog, Jorhat, 1973, pp. 126 f; P.C. Choudhury, *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the 12th Century A.D.*, DHAS, Gauhati, 2nd edition, 1966, pp. 101 f.

163. Waddell, *op. cit.*, pp. 49 f.

164. B.K. Kakati, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, 3rd impression, 1967, Gauhati, pp. 59 ff; *Kalita Jatir Itibritta*, pp. 4 ff; Major S. Johri, 'A brief History of Assam', *where India, China and Burma Meet*, Calcutta, 1933, pp. 34 ff.

165. Cited from, B.K. Kakati, *Kalita Jatir Itibritta*, pp. 4.

*Earlyr Rey were known as Miris and Abons respectively.

On the basis of these references, Neufville located the kingdom 'to the eastward of Bhot (Bhutan) and the northward of Sadiya, extending in the Plains beyond the mountains. Neufville also confirms that the kingdom was washed away by a great flood during the middle of the 18th century,¹⁶⁶ which view is supported by S.K. Bhuyan.¹⁶⁷ The *buranjis*, however, do not speak of any Kalita kingdom. It is probable that some of the Bhuyans, who, at times, need to govern their respective territories on both banks of the Brahmaputra, as independent lords, were Kalitas. The *Bibidh Khanda Buranji*, incorporated in *Deodhai Assam Buranji*, contains reference to one Bhadrasen, who was ruling in a tract in the north bank and was defeated by the Chutiya King Gauri Narayan or Ratnadhvaj Pal (c 1224-1259).¹⁶⁸ This Bhadrasen might be a Kalita Bhuyan, ruling like an independent king. The Bhuyans were finally subdued by the Ahom King Pratap Singha (1603-1641).

There are references to certain Kalitas who were given responsible offices in Ahom administration. One of them was Manthir Bharali Barua, the Incharge of the royal store, who was promoted to the rank of a Phukan and then sent as the supreme commander of the Ahom army to fight the invading Mughals under the great general Mir Jumla.^{169*} Another Kalita, named Kekeru, who was holding the office of Cholahdara Phukan (chief chamberlain) during the reign of Lakshmi Singha (1769-1780), rendered valuable service to the monarch in suppressing the Matak Rebellion, for which he became such a great favourite of the latter, that he began to disregard even the three cabinet ministers—the Buragohain and the Borpatragohain. Pressurised by the ministers, the monarch

166. J.B. Neufville, 'On the Geography and Population of Assam', *Asiatic Reserches*, Vol. XVI, Calcutta, 1828, pp. 344 f.

167. S.K. Bhuyan, *Swargadeo Rajesvar Singha*, Gauhati, 1975, p. 104. (henceforth abbreviated as SRSB).

168. DAB, p. 194.

169. SAB, pp. 31 f, 90 ; AB (SM), p. 93.

*His appointment created dissatisfaction among the Ahom nobles. S.K. Bhuyan refers to him as a Kayastha (AARB, p. 8)

at last dismissed the Kalita Phukan and ordered him to settle in Tamulbari on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The Phukan, soon after his arrival in that place, proclaimed himself King, assuming the name 'Mirhang'. An expedition was sent against him. He was defeated and then killed.¹⁷⁰ Haradata Chaudhury of Kamrup, who revolted during the reign of Gaurinath Singha¹⁷¹ (1780-1794), was perhaps a Kalita by caste. His activities would be discussed in a subsequent chapter of this work.

Several Ahom kings married Kalita girls. Thus Suhungmung or the Dihingia Raja married the daughter of a Sonari¹⁷², who was a Kalita. Queen Phuleswari, who yielded sovereign power in the reign of Siva Singha (1714-1744) and who by her activities precipitated the Matak Rebellion, with the daughter of a Nat-Kalita.¹⁷³ Chandrakanta Singha married Padmavati, the daughter of an ordinary disciple of the Bengena-ati *Satra* and made her the Chief Queen.¹⁷⁴ Padmavati is believed to be a Kalita girl.

Quite a good number of Kalitas accepted initiation from the Mayamara *Mahanta* and introduced themselves as Matak-Kalitas. Being traders and professionals, they added to the economic prosperity of the *Satra* and contributed to the success of the Matak Rebellion.

The *Brittials* or the professional castes : There were also certain professional castes in the Matak community. They were loosely called *Brittials*. Though the term usually denoted the goldsmiths and the blacksmiths, other professionals were also included within it. Most prominent of these were the *Yogis* (snake-charmers), *Katanis* (rearers of *Muga* and *Pat* worms),

170. TB, pp. 76 ff ; MS chronicle of Lakshmi Singha ; HAG, p. 198 ; SRSB, pp. 103 f.

171. TB, p. 118.

172. P. Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdom*, p. 309.

173. TB, p. 37.

174. HKB, p. 35 ; TB (E), p. 197.

Hiras (potters), *Salois* (carpenters), *Rajakas* (washermen), *Gowals* (cowherds) and *Napits* (barbers).

Further, a Muslim tailor named Dheli Darji accepted initiation from Aniruddhadeva, the founder of the Mayamara *Satra*. He was shown the highest respect by the *Guru*, who passed injunctions to his disciples that any of them, be he a Brahmana, if visited his (Dheli Darji) place, should dine from the same hearth, or in his turn, if the Muslim convert would visit the house of caste-Hindu Matak, he was to be shown all respect due to an honoured guest. Dheli Darji after his conversion, was named Dhyanapati. He also enjoyed the office of a Bora under the Ahom government. Among the Mataks, the descendants of Dheli Darji are still known as '*Garia Barar Ghar*', meaning the 'family of the Garia Bora', as the Muslims in Assam are popularly called *Garia*, which is a corruption of the term '*Gauria*', indicating that they hailed from Gaur. Later, when a branch of the Mayamara *Satra* was established at Tiphuk in about 1765, a line of the descendants of Dheli Darji, who became disciples of that *Satra*, was shown regards in like way. The head of the line who was a *Khatowal Burha* or incharge of a *Khat* belonging to the *Satra* was made a member of the Council of four, who could make and unmake the head of a *Satra*.*

Conclusion :

Thus members of different castes and tribes, becoming disciples of the Mayamara *Satra*, formed a greater community—the Matak community. There was never a tribe called 'Matak', but their sectarian unity, which was later reinvigorated by a political purpose of fighting the government was so complete that they possessed almost all the characteristics of a regular tribal organisation.¹⁷⁵ Further, the Mayamara and also the Dihing *Satras* did great service to the society by accepting the members of the depressed classes to their fold and placing them

*See *infra*, Chapter II, p. 75.

¹⁷⁵. AARB, p. 254.

on an equal footing with members of the so-called higher castes. S.K. Bhuyan rightly points out :

In other parts of India, the humiliation to which these unfortunates were subjected, drove them to the bosom of other religions ; in Assam, the liberal policy of the Kalasamhati *Satras* (Mayamara and Dihing being the most leading ones) endowed them with a sense of self-respect and individual value.¹⁷⁶

This led to the great popularity of these two *Satras* and particularly the Mayamara, *Satra*, whose disciples increased day by day. As a result, not only the government, but some other *Satras* too, belonging mainly to the Brahmanical order considered the Mataks as their rivals. But the latter overcame all stress and strains and finally succeeded in carving out for themselves an autonomous kingdom.

¹⁷⁶. *Ibid*, p. 197.