

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

TENTH SESSION

SHILLONG : 1989

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The Tenth Session of the North East India History Association was held at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, amidst great enthusiasm and gaiety. This was indeed a memorable occasion in the history of the Association. The Decennial Celebrations aspart, a session was being held for the second time in the same institution and in the same venue that the Association was born ten years ago and the First Session held a year later. The Association is thankful to the authorities of the North-Eastern Hill University and organising it in the befitting manner.

Shri P. G. Marbaniang, Speaker, Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, inaugurated the session which was graced by Shri P. A. Sangma, Chief Minister of Meghalaya, as guest of honour. Professor Iqbal Narain, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. P. Singh, Head, Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University—did the Association a great honour as the Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor J. N. Phukan of the Gauhati University. The release of a commemorative Publication of the Organising committee entitled NEIHA DECENNIAL by Professor H. K. Barpujari, the first President of the Association, a decennial symposium on "A Decade of Historical Research in North-East", and colourful cultural programmes of songs and dances of the seven states of the region by the students of NEHU are among the special features of the decennial Celebrations. A record number of one hundred and eighty delegates attended the session in which ninety research papers were presented and discussed in eleven panels.

The present volume is the proceedings of the tenth session of the North East India History Association held at the North-Eastern Hill University on October 12-14, 1989. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. M. S. Sangma, Dr. Gautam Sengupta, Dr. Soumen Sen, Shri Atul Dev Sarmah and Shri Amitabha Deb for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We must also thank the Indian Council of Historical Research for generous financial assistance to the Association for the session and for publication of the proceedings.

J. B. Bhattacharjee

General Secretary,

North-East India History Association.

Shillong,

The 25th August 1990.

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Bhakti Movement and Aniruddhadeva of Assam

S. Dutta

Yusuf Hussain has rightly pointed out, "Thanks to the teaching, so full and so varied, Brahmanism satisfied the mass of people as well as those who were given to individual, independent reflection. Those who had neither the time nor the opportunity to cultivate their thought by means of the spiritual practices of meditation and contemplation, received dogmas and symbols to worship. The works known under the collective means of tantras describe the rites and the formulas, destined for those who were incapable of appreciating the pantheistic metaphysics of Brahmanism. They believed in symbols and worshipped images, just as they do to-day. It was by maintaining the pliancy of faith for the people of different levels that Brahmanism was able to be at once an intellectual and educative force and an instrument for the propagation of ritualistic dogmas of Polytheism."

But this excessive liberty, in course of time, led to religious chaos, elaborate rituals, bloody sacrifices, esoteric rites and class distinction in Brahmanic-Hinduism. Instead of dipping deep into the mysteries of Tantricism, people very naturally adopted the outward simple and alluring philosophy of sex and palate as the real criterion of their religion. "The land" to quote B. Kakoti, "was infested with inherent teachers of the Vamacara Tantric schools with their insistence on the philosophy of sex and palate. Among religious rites, the most spectacular were bloody sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening noises of drums, cymbals, night-Vigils, virgin worship and the lewd dances of temple woman.² This was more or less practically an all India phenomenon. To save Hinduism from this chaotic condition, it was but necessary to simplify the religious system, rituals and ideologies.

Accordingly, during medieval times (13th to 17th centuries) Hinduism underwent a transformation so great that it has very often been compared to that wrought in western christianity by the Reformation. This infact is known as the 'Bhakti movement' in

the history of India. The focus of religious attention moved, as a result of this Movement, from the great gods and the liturgias connected with polytheism to the one God and his incarnations, especially Krishna and Rama. A new attitude to God, emotional passionate *bhakti* replaced the old practices of sacrificial rites and monistic mediation. Forms of religious expression changed : love-songs to God were sung and group-singing known as Kirtana was created. In the first centuries of its growth Indian vernacular literatures were moved by this religious movement paving the path for the growth of a mass literature. The socia-ritualistic order dominated by the Brahmanas though not completely overthrown, the Brahmanas lost much of their spiritual authority, which eventually passed to the authors of the Vaisnava Bhakti Movement i.e. the Saints and the Gurus, whose songs and biographies became scriptures for their followers. Further, the new devotional religion, without destroying the Hindu social framework, fostered ideas of brotherhood and equality before the Loving Lord. The saints of this movement who were drawn from all levels of society ³

Assam, lying in the North-East frontier of India was also flooded by a wave of this great *Bhakti* movement. For, the religious condition of the then Assam was more or less chaotic of same dimension as in other parts of India. But towards the last decade of the 15th century, the religious history of Tantric Assam moved towards a new direction. The neo-Vaisnavite movement initiated by the saintpoet Sanhardeva in the last decade of the 15th century thus proved to be an epoch-making phenomenon in the religious, and social history of medieval Assam. Thus the movement in Assam was not an isolated phenomenon having no connection whatsoever with the current of Vaisnava revival that swept over the rest of India during the period. The movement moreover, did not differ in essential points from its counterparts elsewhere in Medieval India. "Characteristics", in the words of S. N. Sarma, "like belief in and adoration of a personal God Vishnu or Krishna, emphasis on devotion and faith, recognition of the equality of all persons, the ignoring of the caste distinction at the spiritual level, the high place assigned to virtues like love, piety and non-violence and deprecation of the practice of image-worship, are common to all vaisnavite movements of the middle ages."⁴ In spite of this, the Vaisnavism of Assam was having certain speciality of its own. It evolved a cult of its own first suited to the genius of the people of the locality. The great Vaisnava Resaissance in other parts of India supplied the necessary ideals and inspiration to the initiator of the movement

i. Sankardeva, who spent twelve years outside Assam, visiting holy places and studying religious trends in different parts of the country. Thus within two hundred years of its inception this movement has made neo-Vaisnavism the main religion of the Brahmaputra Valley. Infact, it became the faith of the people. It not only changed their spiritual and moral outlook but prepared the ground for the establishment of a new society based upon the principle of "Universal Social brotherhood". These ideas practised socially through the democratic organisation of the *Satras* were in direct confrontation with the principles of despotism and rigid social distinction prevailing in Assam valley which eventually had an impact on the then political system of the region too.

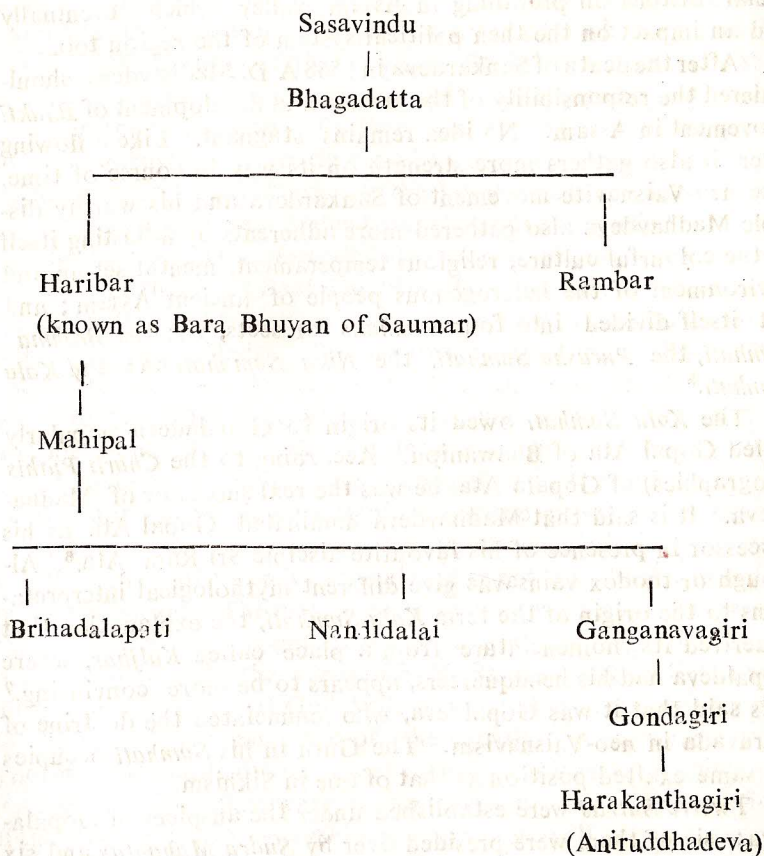
After the death of Sankardeva in 1568 A.D, Madhavdeva shouldered the responsibility of the growth and development of *Bhakti* Movement in Assam. No idea remains stagnant. Like a flowing river, it also gathers more strength on its way in course of time. The neo-Vaisnavite movement of Sankardeva and his worthy disciple Madhavdeva also gathered more adherents by adjusting itself to the colourful culture, religious temperament, mental set-up and environment of the heterogenous people of ancient Assam; and got itself divided into four *Samhatis* or sects, viz; the *Brahma Samhati*, the *Purusha Samhati*, the *Nika Samhati* and the *Kala Samhati*.⁵

The *Kala Samhati* owed its origin to Gopaladeva popularly called Gopal Ata of Bhawanipu. According to the *Charit Puthis* (biographies) of Gopala Ata, he was the real successor of Madhavdeva. It is said that Madhavdeva nominated Gopal Ata as his successor in presence of his favourite disciple Sri Ram Ata.⁶ Although orthodox Vaisnavas give different mythological interpretations to the origin of the term *Kala Samhati*, the explanation that it derived its nomenclature from a place called *Kaljhar*, where Gopaldeva had his headquarters, appears to be more convincing.⁷ It is said that it was Gopaldeva, who enunciated the doctrine of Gurusvada in neo-Vaisnavism. The Guru in his *Samhati* occupies the same exalted position as that of one in Sikhism.

Twelve *Satras* were established under the auspices of Gopaladeva: six of them were presided over by *Sudra Mahantas* and six by *Brahmana Mahantas*. The former six included those of Mayamara, Banhbari or Dihing, Haladhiati, Gajala, Nagaria and Dalai-po; and the latter six included those of Ahatguri, Kathpar, Khaura-mochar, Ikarajan, Habung and Charaibanhi. Of the *Sudra Satras*, Mayamara played a very significant role in the history

of Assam.

The historic Mayamara *Satra* of the Kalasambhati was founded by Aniruddhadeva. He was son of a Bhuyan named Gondagiri, who traced his descent from Sasavindu of Yadu *Vamasa*. His mother Ajali Devi was the daughter of Sankardeva's paternal uncle. He was born in Thursday, 15th *Vaisakha* in 1475 *Saka* (April, 11, 1553 A.D.) The geneology of Aniruddhadeva as given in the *Mayamara Satrar Vamsawali*¹⁰ is being reproduced below:



Gondagiri was a resident of Bishnu-Balikunchi of Narayanpur in the present Lakhimpur district. Aniruddhadeva's earlier name was Hara-Kanthagiri. When he grew up, he developed interest in the teachings of Neo-Vaishavism and desired to receive instru-

ctions from Gopaldeva of Kaljhar, for which he sailed down the Brahmaputra to that place. Before his departure to preceptor's place, Aniruddhadeva acquired sound knowledge of Sanskrit. There he received religious instructions from Gopaladeva for about three and a half years, after which he came back to his own place and founded a *Satra* at Bishnu-Bali-Kunchi. At the time of his initiation Harakanthagiri was advised by Gopaldeva to follow strictly the path of *Bhakti* (devotion) and disseminate this idea among the neophytes in his turn. It is said that it was because Harakanthagiri was to close all other paths of Salvation save the one of *Bhakti*, he was named Aniruddhadeva.¹¹

Aniruddhadeva started propagating the vaisnava religion from the month of Magha (January/Fabruary) of 1523 *Saka* (1601 A D). His first disciple was a Muslim tailor called Dheli Darji, who after initiation was named Dhyanaapati.¹² After staying at Bishnu-Bali-kunchi for a short period Aniruddhadeva because of frequent Dafala (Nishi) raids, shifted its location to Nahar-Ati, on the bank of Marnai river in the present Narayanpur *Mauza* of the North-Lakhimpur sub-division. With his headquarters at Nahar-Ati, Aniruddhadeva initiated a large number of disciples into neo-Vaisnavism. Infact, Nahar Ati *Satra* was the main centre of his activities. He, however, stayed for a short period in Majuli on the bank of a lake called, Moamari and converted many people of the neighbouring area into the new creed. He used to send his apostles or visit himself the tribal areas and spread the message of love, equality and brotherhood among the inhabitants. The democratic outlook of the *Satra* and the spirit of humanism appealed the tribesman and they immediately accepted him as their religious preceptor.

Amongst the tribes, the Morans were the first to be converted. They were followed by the Kacharis, Chutiyas, Barahis, Ahoms and the Brittials (professional castes). Within a short time, Aniruddhadeva occupied among them a position higher than a temporal overlord, so that they would bow their heads only to him and no one else. So rigidly they followed this principle that to avoid bowing their head at the door, they had the entrances to their houses cut at the gable ends and not at transcripts.¹³

Aniruddhadeva had scholarly talents as well. He translated the fourth and the fifth cantos of the *Bhagawatu* into Assamese. He also composed a work called *Bhakti Mangala Ghosha* in line with Madhavdeva's *Namghosa*, which contained 805 cantos. Infact, this scripture is normally used in the devotional congregation of the Mayamara Society, which can be compared with the *Granth-Sahib*

of the Sikhs. Besides, he composed 182 *Bargeets* (devotional prayer songs). By extracting the substance of the *Bhagawata*, he wrote a religious book called *Nija Sastra* in prose and verse, which can be studied only by the senior and mature devotees (*paka Bhakat*). All these compositions still prevalent reveal the scholarly talent of this great Vaisnava Reformer. This talent of the Reformer ultimately attracted some of the upper section of the Assamese society as well. His followers known as Moamariyas (after the name of his *Satra* at Majuli), later on corrupted into Mayamariyas (also known as the Matakas), gradually increased which spread all over Assam.

The news that a large number of the subjects of the Ahom monarch had been accepting Aniruddhadeva as their spiritual proceptor, who was to them was Superior even to the monarch, reached the then Ahom king Sukhampha Khora Raja (1552-1603 A.D.). The Ahom monarchs had been considering otherwise also the Vaisnavite movement as a danger to their growing power, as the teachings of the Vaisnava reformers stood diametrically apposed to the principles on which the absolute Ahom monarchy rested. Earlier, with a view to nipping the movement in the bud, Suhungmung or the Dihingiya Raja (1497-1539 A.D.) adopted a hostile attitude towards the Vaisnava reformers. He ordered Madhavdeva, Sankardeva's popular disciple, and Hari, Sankardeva's son-in-law, to be beheaded on the plea that they failed to catch elephants for the king. Madhavdeva's life, however, the king spared knowing that he was an innocent bachelor devotee. At this, Sankardeva, a subject of the Ahom Kingdom, left his homeland and went to Koch Behar. Now Sukampha wanted to carry on an investigation to the missionary activities of Aniruddhadeva who was alleged to propagate seditious teachings among his disciples, who were at the same time subjects of the Ahom monarch. Aniruddhadeva was summoned to the court but he could convince the king of his purely missionary work among the backward classes without any tinge of political dogma. The king, being satisfied, permitted him to carry on his work. The Mayamara *Satra* thus survived the first test of its existence.

Aniruddhadeva passed away on 11 *Pausa* (first week of December) 1548 *Saka* (1626 A.D.). At his demise, his son Krishanandadeva became the *Satradhikar*, who shifted the *Satra* to Khutiaputa in Jorhat in February, 1630.

Thus members of different castes and tribes becoming disciples of the Mayamara *Satra* founded by Aniruddhadeva, formed

a greater religious community i.e. the Matak Community.¹⁴ 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. Thus Mayamara *Satra* (also the Dihing *Satra*) of the *Kalasanghati* did great service to the society by accepting the members of the depressed and backward classes to their fold and placing them on an equal footing with members of the so-called higher castes.¹⁵

But long accustomed to their traditional rites, manners and customs, the different tribes in the beginning were found not easily amenable to the discipline of Neo-Vaisnavism.¹⁶ Any imposition or drastic change in their traditional pattern of life, would have naturally caused hostile reaction. Aniruddhadeva and his successors, therefore had to shape their religious dogmas and practices in such a way as to suit the temperament of the tribal communities. Relaxation and compromises thus became the cornerstone of their policy in the dealings with the people. Accordingly, while efforts were made to carry on the messages and teachings of the new creed into the midst of these new converts, some of their old beliefs and rites were allowed to continue in a mild and modified form. The consequent rise in number of disciples by leaps and bounds excited jealousy of some other *Satras* of Assam. And for this, Aniruddhadeva was branded from some corners as a dissenter, a promoter of heterodoxy for offering initiation to unrefined tribes. The prevalence of certain Tantric rites amongst some of his followers for some time as a result of Aniruddhadeva's give and take policy, was attributed to Aniruddhadeva and to his successors' connivance. These in fact do not stand the test of reality and credibility.

Even though the Matak or the Mayamariyas are also Vaisnavas and Aniruddhadeva, the founder of the sect, had acknowledged his debt and origin to Sankaradeva and Gopaladeva,¹⁷ the pioneer apostles of Vaisnavism in Assam, this sect in course of time, developed certain distinct characteristics of its own.

The Mayamara Mahanta usually avoided introducing Hindu rites or imposing Brahmana priesthood on them, though the same was allowed for the higher caste followers of his sect. The tribal disciples of the Mayamara *Satra* had, therefore no relation with Brahmana priesthood. In course of time, when they became more Hinduised, they gave up most of their tribal rites and food habits, but did not accept Brahmana priesthood.

Further, the tribal communities considered all their members as equal. As a result, we find great flexibility of caste rules among

the disciples of the Mayamara *Satras*. Here a Brahmana, simply because of his birth, could not claim, unlike in other *Satras*, a higher position or status to a non-Brahmana in the social functions like the *Sabhah* (religious congregation), where a *Bhakat* (devotee) irrespective of his caste, took the leading part in its management, by virtue of his being the *Barbura* (village headman). A Brahmana, if he lacked these qualities, could not take the leading part simply because of his birth.

Equality of human being was not only taught but also practised in a Mayamara *Satra*. The *Guru*, despite the extreme reverence shown to him as the living embodiment of God, did not consider himself superior to the community of disciples. In the social field, he was only a senior disciple. When the disciples bow their heads to him, he also reciprocated by bowing his head to them in a like manner, which was even never imagined in other Vaisnava *Satras*.

Even in practising certain social rites in *Namghar* (public prayer hall), or the *Satra*, the spirit of equality was greatly emphasised, where all disciples irrespective of age or sex were given equal importance. It is still seen in the Mayamara *Satra* that while distributing *Prasada*, no one is allowed to take his share, unless each of them gets his. They all would start together and leave together. Even little children are not given any relaxation in this respect.

The majority of the disciples, illiterate as they were, could not read the religious texts written by Aniruddhadeva or his successors. Moreover, being accustomed to worship some concrete objects so long, they could not grasp immediately the Philosophy of Neo-Vaisnavism, which lacked idol-worship. To solve this problem the *Guru* himself was considered as the *Murti* or the image of God ; and Aniruddhadeva, the founder of the *Satra*, was thus conceived as the *Adyamurti* (The Primal Image). It could be noted here that unlike many other Vaisnava *Satras* of Assam and some other parts of the country, the Mayamara *Satras* never had any *Bigraha* worship (image worship), which has been continued till to-day. This honour was always given to their *Guru* and the religious scriptures composed by Aniruddhadeva and his successors.

In other Vaisnava *Satras* in the installation ceremony of an *Adhikar* or *Gosain*, his co-*Adhikar* from a fixed *Satra* used to send *Nirmali* or garland, only after receiving which, the *Dekadhikar* (would be *Adhikar*) was formally declared as *Adhikar*. But in the Mayamara *Satra*, there was no such practice. Here, it is not a co-*Adhikar*, but the community of disciples, which installed a

Dekadhikar on headship of a *Satra*.

The Adhikar or the Mahanta of a Mayamara *Satra* did not collect any religious tax, and therefore officers like *Sajtola* (*Satola*), *Medhi* or *Barmedhi*, found in other *Satras* for such purposes are absent here. The Mayamara *Satras* constantly refused to accept the offer of rentfree grants from the Ahom kings unlike most other Vaisnava *Satras* of Assam, and thus developed an independent growth out of the titles voluntarily offered by the disciples.

In construction of the Mayamara Namghar and the *Satras* as well, certain specialities were observed. A Mayamara Namghar did not have any *Manikut* (Sacred place for keeping religious scriptures or idols). Instead, it had a separate house called *Dharmaghar*, which is also called *Namghar* in some places, which housed the scriptures. The hall for community prayer was called *Rabha-gar* in some places, which did not have any enclosure, as it had to accommodate a large number of people. As such, such halls were considered unfit for keeping religious scriptures, and a separate chamber for that purpose had to be built. Moreover, the Mayamara *Satra* had certain scriptures, which were accessible to only a permitted section of the disciples, for which also, some amount of privacy and security was essential. Again, in absence of an image, the religious scriptures themselves served as one of the concrete forms of God, the other being the *Guru* himself. Considering that their regular public visuality could diminish their importance, the *sastras* were kept separately and were brought to the public prayer hall only occasionally, showing highest veneration to them.

In the Mayamara *Satra*, the *Ojapali* and other dances performed by individual disciples in most other *Satras*, were not given any importance. It was the *Gayan-Bayan* a community orchestral performance, which used to predominate in the Mayamara society. *Gayan-Bayan* in a Mayamara *Satra* totally differed from that of the other Vaisnava *Satras*, where the religious recital from the *Kirtana* of Sankardeva and *Namghosha* of Madhavdeva was performed with clappings and playing of *Khol* and *Tal* (cymbal). In the Mayamara *Satra*, the place of *Kirtana* was taken by the *Adyeswar Sastra* i.e., the text composed by the Primal Image or the founder of the *Satra* i.e., Aniruddhadeva.

Another important point of difference between the Mayamara *Satra* and the other Vaisnava *Satras* was the non-performance of any *Bhaona* (religious play). *Marich-Badh*, a play written by Nityanadadeva, the fourth *Satradhikar* of the Mayamara *Satra*,

is perhaps the only exception in this respect. The reason for non-performance of *Bhaona* might be that, in a *Bhaona*, be it for a short while, certain evil forces like *Asuras* (demons), and other gods and goddesses get importance. Such performance might create confusion in the minds of the simple devotees, as it might go against monotheistic principle taught by the new creed. Because of the same reason, *Rasleela* performed in some prominent Vaisnava *Satras* of Assam is not observed in the Mayamara *Satras*, for here in *Rasleela* alongwith Krishna, Radha also gets importance. Monotheism being its main tenet, only Krishna or Vishnu is given supreme and sole importance.

As the performance of *Bhaona* became obsolete in the Mayamara *Satra*, it naturally obviated the use of *Khol* as well, which appropriately fits with *Bhaona*. In the *Gayan-Bayan* of a Mayamara *Satra*, only Mridanga, which is a traditional musical instrument of the region, is used.¹⁸

Thus the disciples of Aniruddhadeva formed in course of time a distinct community by themselves, developing certain cultural trait and patterns of social behaviour under the Vaisnava reformers of their own within the orbit of Vaisnavism. The members of different castes and tribes, becoming disciples of this *Satra*, formed a greater religious community i.e. the Matak Community. The wide popularity of this *Satra* with corresponding development in its material prosperity attracted large number of disciples to its fold, which led in course of time to the establishment of several Vaisnava *Satras* of the Mayamara sect out of which five prominent *Satras* are still very famous in Assam. These are Dinjoy, Garpara, Madarkhat, Tiphuk (all in Dibrugarh district) and Puranimati in Jorhat district. This wide popularity, on the other hand, excited jealousy of other Vaisnava *Satras* and the enmity of the then Ahom government. This led to persecution of several Mayamara *Gurus* and disciples by the Ahom Government, as the *Satra* did not compromise its principles with those of the absolute Ahom Government. This historic struggle of the Matak with the then Ahom regime known popularly as the 'Moomaria Rebellion' in the history of Assam may be compared with historic struggle of the Sikhs with mighty Mughals because of the persecution of the Sikh *Gurus* and their devotees. This historic struggle drastically changed the course of the history of Assam, nay of the entire north-eastern region, which is beyond the purview of this article.

The followers of Aniruddhadeva and his successors at present, according to an unofficial census, is estimated to be more than twelve lakhs. Most of them live in the present Dibrugarh district of Assam, the erstwhile Matak Kingdom, and the rest live scattered throughout the Brahmaputra Valley.

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