

## The Moran State Formation in Assam

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"The State or polity formations that emerged from the indigenous tribal bases or through military adventurism among the tribal communities in Pre-colonial India", as has been rightly pointed out by Professor J. B. Bhattacharjee, is a very less explored and neglected area in the history of India.<sup>1</sup> This is all the more applicable in this north-eastern part of the country. Even though some works have been done on the Ahom, Cachar, Manipur, Jaintia, Khasi, Tripuri and the Mizo states from the north-east, under the project "Tribal Polities and State Systems in Pre-colonial Eastern and North-Eastern India" sponsored by the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, much work is yet to be done on the State formations of the other tribal people of the North-eastern region. The Moran state formation is such an example. This work has been undertaken by me mostly because of the inspiration and constant reminders I received from Professor J. B. Bhattacharjee, Professor of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Here again the study is mostly based on conceptual and historical sources that are available to us from the studies of Professor Bhattacharjee and few others.

Professor Bhattacharjee has enumerated certain common factors or elements that are responsible for the growth and evolution of tribal states in Pre-colonial India.<sup>2</sup> The factors that might have worked in such evolutions are (i) Growth of Private property that created class-divisions in the Society, paving path for dominance of one section by the other; (ii) Tug of war for dominance in a particular locality among the different tribes that led to a maintenance of balance of power among them or submission of the vanquished to the victor; (iii) Continuation of such a war-fever, both for offensive and defensive; that helped concentration of power, which is still done by many governments to divert attention of the people from internal trouble by creating a phobia of external aggre-

ssion that helped centralisation of power ; (iv) This led to permanent stock-piling of armaments and armed forces that helped further in strengthening authority of the tribal chiefs ; (v) Gradual accumulation of surplus products in the hands of the chiefs that resulted from slow improvement in the mode and system of production in agriculture and other fields ; (vi) Hinduisation of the ruling class that helped in their deification in the form of divine origin of the rulers ; (vii) Adoption and championing of popular creeds by the ruling chiefs to brighten their images among the masses ; (viii) Matrimonial and diplomatic relationship among the chiefs of the different tribes to brush up their images further ; (iv) Exploitation of religious sentiment of the masses for political purposes, that sometimes resulted in establishment of states.

It is, of course, a fact that all the factors mentioned above did not work uniformly and simultaneously in cases of formations of all the tribal states. In certain cases, some factors played a more dominant role, in other cases some others did the same. In case of Moran state formation also, more or less this rule was applicable.

In absence of any written record, it is very difficult to give an account of the early political history of the Morans, even though they are considered as aborigines of Assam. On the basis of racial and linguistic affinities, the Morans are ascribed Bodo origin. Gait in his *Report on Census of India, Assam* 1891 has mentioned that the Morans had their own language, which was akin to that of the Kacharis. In course of time, they have given it up in favour of Assamese.<sup>5</sup> Further, Gait states with emphasis in his *History of Assam* that the Moran language was undoubtedly Bodo<sup>4</sup>. P. R. T. Gurdon also proves the affinity of the Moran language with that of the Bodos on concrete linguistic evidences,<sup>5</sup> which was further confirmed by Grierson<sup>6</sup>. Even though some Assamese scholars like Benu-dhar Sarma<sup>7</sup> and Binadhar Das<sup>8</sup> have a tendency to ascribe them Aryan origin, some of their counterparts<sup>9</sup> confirm the Bodo origin of the Morans. Thus linguistic affinity, as well as, physical features and other common characteristics of the Morans with the rest of the Bodos evidence clearly their origin from this race.

As regards the original home of the Bodos (Morans as well), there appears to be a consensus of opinion among the experts that the trans-Himalayan regions i.e., the places near

the head waters of the Yang-tse-kiang and the Howang-Ho rivers, to the west of China, and Tibet were the original place of these people.<sup>10</sup> While migrating to India, various routes, both river and mountain passes, covering a wide area from Eastern-India to North-East Bengal, might have been followed by them. The important routes of migration thus followed by the different waves of these immigrants to India at various times were through the Patkai Hills and the courses of the great rivers like the Brahmaputra, and other routes between India and Tibet through Bhutan and Nepal. While a section of the Bodos entered and established themselves over the Brahmaputra valley fairly early, another section extended into the North and East Bengal and thence into North Bihar.<sup>11</sup> The Morans, who perhaps came a little later than the earlier streams of the Bodos, occupied a part of the extreme eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley, vacated by their predecessors. Endle, therefore, assumes that a few centuries ago, three brothers Moylong, Moran and Moyran inhabited in the Hunkong valley at the upper reaches of the Chindwin river. While the eldest of them remained there, the youngest Moyran migrated to Nepal, and second one Moran, crossed the Patkai range and settled near the Tiphuk river of the Doomdooma region of present Assam. The Morans, he further assumes, took their names after their progenitor and Chief 'Moran'.<sup>12</sup> Kedar Brahmachari, however, was of opinion that a people known as Maurang, Murang or Morang, migrated to *Saumar* area (eastern most part of ancient Assam) from Nepal.<sup>13</sup> Biradhar Das, supporting this view, states that the Morans migrated to Assam with a prince of Nepal in about 7th Century A. D., first into Western Assam and then to *Saumar*.<sup>14</sup> Benudhar Sarma, of course, mentions that a man from the Meram clan of the kingdom of Dharmapala of ancient Assam became king in an area known as Lahdoi (an area on the south of Upper Brahmaputra and on the east of Sadiya), much before the coming of Sukapha into Assam.<sup>15</sup>

But the most probable route of migration of these people into Assam appears to be from towards Patkai range. A wave of them, however, might have cross-migrated from towards Nepal to the present Doomdooma region of ancient *Saumar*. S. K. Chatterjee places the probable period of migration of the Bodos from 2000 B. C. onwards.<sup>16</sup> As the Morans were later waves of immigrants, they might have entered Assam at

a much later date. Despite that fact, there is no denying that Morans are one of the aboriginal tribes of the Brahmaputra valley. It appears from the contentions of the different writers that the Morans had their own group leaders or chiefs under whose guidance they moved towards Assam. In course of time, when they permanently settled in a particular area, they handed over more power to their leader/leaders as a sign of gratitude of leadership for successfully leading them to such a fertile and congenial place.

The Morans initially resorted to *Jhumming* or shifting cultivation, for, some Morans as late as the 19th century, followed this system of cultivation<sup>17</sup>. Community feeling and corporate life grew stronger for pursuing such an agricultural system. This made the group leaders/chiefs gradually more powerful. Any surplus production, that might have resulted from improved means of production as a result of introduction of yoke, plough, harrow, etc., might have made the chiefs more powerful at a later stage. The Morans were expert horticulturists<sup>18</sup> from the beginning. They were also expert catchers and trainers of wild elephants<sup>19</sup>, as their area is still abounded with wild elephants. All this gradually led to economic prosperity of the people resulting in concentration of power and in the hands of the Chiefs.

Thus the Morans came and settled in Assam much before the Ahoms which enabled them to set up and consolidate a regime of their own by the time the Ahoms came to Assam. The administration of ancient Kamarupa was probably at that time a conglomeration of a number of small communities, each under its own chief or headman and independent of one another. So long the central administration was strong, whether wielded by an Aryan or Aryanised monarch, the tribal communities recognised its supremacy, but as soon as it became weak, they would also assume independence.<sup>20</sup> The Morans were not an exception to this rule.

When Dharmapala (c 1090-1115 A. D.), the king of the Pala line of Kamarupa (ancient Assam) renounced the world and Jayapala came to the throne (c 1115-1125 A. D.), the central authority became weak. Taking advantage of this, the king of Bengal, Ramapala sent his general Mayan with a strong army to invade Kamarupa. Jayapala was easily defeated and ousted. Thus the reign of the Pala kings, who appears to have brought a kind of political unity to ancient Kamarupa

by subordinating almost all the chiefs of the Eastern Brahmaputra valley including that of the Morans, came to an end. Mayan did not stay in this country for a long time. He returned to Bengal after installing one Tingya Deva, perhaps a member of the old royal families of Kamarupa as a vassal king. But when Rampala was engaged in a war with Orissa Tingya Deva revolted and declared independence. But he was defeated and killed in 1130 A. D. by Vaidyadeva, the son of the minister of Kamarapala, the successor of Rampala. Vaidyadeva became the king of Kamarupa in 1133 A. D.<sup>21</sup>

Vaidya Deva perhaps did not have an effective control over the eastern part of the Kamarupa kingdom. Communication problem and considerable distance of the eastern region from his headquarters at Gauhati were mainly responsible for this. As a result, mushroom states grew up under various chiefs who were related either directly or indirectly to the old royal families, or were important officials of the old regime or were mere upstarts who could command a following from among the local people.<sup>22</sup> Taking advantage of the above situation, the Morans also perhaps carved out their independent principality in the beginning of the 12th century A. D.

Padmeswar Gogoi has also confirmed this by saying that, prior to the advent of Hso-Ka-Hpa ( Sukapha ), the whole of eastern Assam was under tribal rule. Almost all the tribes, in occupation of the various localities in the Brahmaputra valley, according to him, belonged to the Mongoloid Bodo race.<sup>23</sup> It is mentioned in some chronicles<sup>24</sup> that before the arrival of Sukapha, the Nara Raja collected tributes from the Chutias, the Kacharis, the Nagas, the Barahis, the Morans and the people of Kamata. For collection of such tributes three officers were deputed, one for Kamata and Barahi territories, one for the Chutia and Moran territories and another for the territories of the Kacharies and the Nagas.<sup>25</sup>

From the above factors, it appears that a small kingdom comprising roughly the present Dibrugarh district was occupied by the Morans, who became independent along with their other counterparts, when the Pala dynasty collapsed. No systematic record of their rules, or the nature of their government is available to us. It is also not exactly known, whether the whole area was ruled by one single chief or was divided into small tractsd rule by different chiefs.

Even though sources are silent, it may not be wrong on

our part to conceive such an idea, that there might have been some warfares among the different tribes of the eastern region, even though they belong to the same Bodo stock, for their respective political supremacy. Ultimately some kind of agreement to maintain a kind of balance of power with more or less fixed boundaries among them might have been accepted. For, immediately and after coming of the Ahoms, chronicles have not mentioned any conflict among them.

Different sources give different boundaries to the Moran principality, but there is no denying the fact that it centered round the present Dibrugarh district of Assam. Extract of an old chronicle published in the *Lik Phan Tai* gives the boundary of the Moran kingdom as follows :

‘The Buri Dihing in the North, the Dikhow in the South, Nagahat in the East and the Barahi Fika in the West. Its capital was at Kaktal, to the south of Sadiya.’

An old Assamese manuscript entitled *Buragohain Vamsawali*<sup>26</sup> has mentioned the boundaries of the Moran tract as follows along with those of others :

Sl. No.	Races with their Names	Political Boundaries			
		North	South	East	West
1.	Moran state	Buri Dihing river	Disang river	Suffry river	Brahma-putra river
2.	Barahi state	Disang river	Dikhaw river	Nagahat	Barahi Fika
3.	Chutia Kingdom	Mountain	Buri Dihing	Brahma-putra river	Sisi river
4.	Kachari Kingdom	Dikhow river	Hills	Hills	Dhansiri river
5.	Bara Bhuyan Territories	Mountain	Brahma-putra	Sisi river	Gang Bihali.

This account appears to be more reliable, in the sense that if the boundary of the Moran State is extended upto the Barahi Fika in the west, as given in an old chronicle, an extract of which is incorporated in the *Lik-Phan-Tai*, the accommodation of the boundary of the Barahi state becomes difficult. Harakanta Barua also refers Kaktal as the headquarters of the Morans.<sup>27</sup> The same reference is found in the work of Endle at a later period.<sup>28</sup> There is at present no place

in eastern Assam bearing the name Kaktal. However, since we have the boundary of the Moran country, we can safely locate it within the present Tinsukia Sub-Division of the Dibrugarh district near about Sadiya, which is also supported by popular tradition.

Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam, accompanied by a strong force and about 9000 followers, arrived at the plains of the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 A.D., in a place near about present Namrup, after a desperate march lasting for a period of 13 years.<sup>29</sup> The first tribes, whom Sukapha met in the Brahmaputra valley, were the Morans and the Barahis. The chief of the Morans was then Badaucha and that of the Barahis was Thakumtha or Thamithama;<sup>30</sup> According to some chronicles,<sup>31</sup> however, Thakumtha was the chief of both the Morans and the Barahis\*. Sukapha, for various reasons, had to proceed against these tribes with tact and caution. One of the important reasons was that the number of Ahom population who came with him had been considerably decreased by the time he arrived in Assam, because of his constant fights on his way, and also because of his leaving many of his followers in several conquered strategic places as his rear-guards, as well as, to pursue cultivation to supply the advance-guard with necessary food supply.<sup>32</sup> In order to ascertain the strength of the neighbouring people, the north of Dillih-mukh (a river near Namrup), Sukapha is said to have despatched some spies, who could collect the information that the combined fighting strength of the Morans and the Barahis would come upto about 4000.<sup>33</sup>

Even though Sukapha had sufficient force to enter into direct clash with these tribes, he preferred resorting first to diplomatic means. He, therefore, organised a feast and sent them invitations with the following words :

“We have come from the east. You are the *Sthanagiris* (i.e. the original settlers), and we are your guests. Let us meet together and acquaint us with the people and villages around”;<sup>34</sup>

At this the Moran and the Barahis came to meet Sukapha with presents of their own produce. Sukapha received them cordially. Subsequently majority of the tribe were won over by Sukapha with diplomatic means, and they accepted him as their overlord.<sup>35</sup> Those who refused, were compelled to do so by force. According to *Purani Assam Buranji*, the headmen

of these families were invited to participate in a feast and when they became intoxicated, they were killed by Sukapha's man. This made their followers acknowledge Sukapha's suzerainty<sup>36</sup>. In order to strengthen his relationship with the Morans and the Barahis, Sukapha married four of their princesses. His example was soon followed by his followers. This intermarriage was greatly facilitated by the fact that Sukapha and his followers did not bring their wives when they came from Nara<sup>37</sup>. Sukapha gradually managed to engage the Morans as fuel suppliers and orchard keepers, and the Barahis as wood cutters, valets, cooks, store keepers, casket-bearers, physicians and poultry keepers<sup>38</sup>. Moreover, Sukapha started three *Khats* (estates) known as *Gachikala Khat*, *Barakhowa Khat* and *Eugera Khat* to have necessary supplies and engaged many Morans in opening those *Khats*.<sup>39</sup>

We face here certain pertinent questions as to why the Morans and the Barahis accepted Sukapha's overlordship so easily? Why an independent people like them accepted the servitude of the Ahoms? Sukapha with his qualitatively superior force could impress the Morans and the Barahis. Sukapha had with him 300 horses and some special type of swords called *Hengdan*, which were novel to the Morans and the Barahis<sup>40</sup>. The latter were terrified and dared not protest the new conquerors, for which they even called them A-ham (unparallel). †

Sukapha could have exacted annual tribute from these tribes (of course in kind), which was done by the Nara king. But Sukapha was not a marauder, as he came with the intention of permanently settling here in Assam. In course of his expedition, his followers gradually decimated. The establishment of a permanent kingdom with a little following was practically impossible. So it was of vital interest to him to absorb and assimilate the local people. This consideration of practical necessity forced Sukapha to change his attitude of a traditional conqueror and accept a policy of winning over the hearts of the people by several means. He therefore, decided against imposing arbitrary taxes on them. Above all, he established matrimonial relationship with them. By all these, he became one among them, for which they it is said, nurtured no hatred towards him and his followers. This is proved by the remark of these people: "This band of immigrants of the monarch and his followers has made us their labourers by tricks; yet then we do not dislike them, rather we prefer

to serve them"<sup>41</sup>. Gait, therefore, has remarked that "the treatment given to the Morans and the Barahis by Sukapha can be considered as the most judicious"<sup>42</sup>.

In the reign of Subinpha (1281-1293), Sukapha's grandson, Jhaururu Buragohain married Debaka, the beautiful daughter of the Moran chief. He died leaving two sons Thabuk and Bakul. Thabuk later on was made the Burgohain with the name Chaufrangdam. The second son Bakul was made the Moran-Gohain Barua or the Governor of the Moran country.<sup>43</sup> Certain chronicles, however, state that Jhaururu Buragohain intermarried not with the daughter of the Moran chief, but with an ordinary Moran girl and that, he had only one son, who was subsequently made the Buragohain<sup>44</sup>.

The grandsons and the other relatives of the Moran chief were, in course of time, established in responsible positions in different parts of the Ahom kingdom, such as, Charga, Paibals, Dihing Janji, Bagh-chau, Langkak, etc<sup>45</sup>. Even though specific references are not available in the *buranjis*, it can be assumed that the Morans lent their services in the expansion and consolidation of the Ahom kingdom. In course of time when the Ahom kingdom was further extended towards the west, many officers of the Ahom administration were recruited from the relatives of the Moran chiefs and others. Even some top-ranking officials like that of the Barpatra Gohain was recruited from the Morans.

Next to the Morans and the Barahis, the people that came into conflict with the Ahoms were the Chutias from about the middle of the 14th century. After a temporary friendship, hostile relationship started between them, that ultimately resulted in the annexation of the Chutia kingdom during the reign of the Ahom king Suhungmung Dihingia Raja (1497-1539 A. D.). The annexation of the Chutia, Moran and Barahi kingdoms eased the path of the Ahoms to deal with the Kacharis, who ruled over an extensive territory on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. The Ahoms succeeded in wresting almost the entire plain-territories of the Kacharis. Thus on the bases of the erstwhile tribal territories of the Morans, Barahis, Chutias, Kacharis, etc., the super-structure of the Ahom kingdom was built, that gave a kind of political unity and cultural assimilation to the whole of Assam.

Because of their bravery and courage, the Morans, it is said, were named 'Mataks' by the Ahoms. Further, the Morans

were one of the first tribes in Eastern Assam to be converted to Vaishnavism by Aniruddhadeva, the founder of the *Mayantra Satra*<sup>48</sup>.

But the Morans, who had been so long extending their support to the success of the Ahom monarchy, subsequently became critical of it for various factors. The religious persecution, the oppressive *Paik* system of the Ahom regime, high-handedness of some Ahom officials forced the Morans, along with the other people of Assam, to revolt against the Ahom Government under the leadership of two Moran officials Nahar Khora Saikia and Raghav Barbarua. They dethroned the then Ahom monarch Lakshmi Singha in October 1769 and put their own nominees Ramakanta, a Moran, on the throne. Lakshmi Singha soon recovered his throne and followed a policy of persecution against the rebels. This did not dampen their spirit. They revolted again and again, which gradually spread to the whole of Assam, that forced Gaurinath Singha (1780-1795), the Ahom monarch, to flee away from his capital. This time several Matak principalities were established. Bharat Singha ruled in Majuli, and Harihar Tati ruled in Japari-bhita, which covered more or less the present Lakhimpur district of Assam. But all these principalities were reconquered by the Ahoms either with their own force or with the help of the British.

But the kingdom founded at Bengmara (present Tinsukia town) by Sarbananda Singha known as the Matak Kingdom (covering more or less the present Dibrugarh district of Assam) and predominantly inhabited by the Moran people of the Matak community, could exact recognition from the Ahom Government (1805 A. D.) and then of the British. It is held by some that this way the Morans avenged their defeat of 1228 A. D. However, this kingdom was annexed to the British Empire in 1839 A. D.<sup>49</sup>

### Notes & References

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Bhuyan, (ed). Gauhati University, 1960, p. 5 (Henceforth abbreviated as SAB).

\* It is presumed by some that the Morans under their leader Badaucha were subordinate to the Barahis. An Assamese MS gives a different account which says that both the Morans and the Barahis were subordinate to the ruling tribe, the Chutias. cf Ney Elias, *Introductory sketch of the History of the Shans in Upper Burma and Western Yunnan*, Calcutta, 1976, pp. 61f.

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35. *Ibid.*

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

39. *Ibid.*, p. 13 ; *Ibid.*, p. 10.

40. DAB, p. 100 ; SAB, p. 5.

41. HKB, p. 12 ; KTP, p. 10.

† This is said to be responsible for the coinage of such words as 'Ahom' and 'Assam'.

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