

The Morans

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The Morans, who form an important element of the present population of Assam, inhabit predominantly in the Doomdooma region of the Dibrugarh district of Assam. They are mostly disciples of the Mayamara *Satras*, founded by Anirudhadeva, and thus constitute an important section of the Matak community. The Morans, in fact, are considered as very aboriginal people of Assam. For various reasons, they in spite of their glorious role in the past history of Assam, are unable to attract attention they deserve from the historians, excepting stray references.

The *burnajis* (chronicles), while giving a picture of the political condition 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 13th century, refer to the Morans (Mataks) as a tribe ruling within Buridihing river on the north, Disang river in the south, Suffry river in the east and the Brahmaputra in the west.¹ This indicates that the Morans came and settled in Assam much before the Ahoms, which enabled them to conquer, consolidate and set up a regime of their own in the region mentioned above.

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 who can 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, Murang or Morang, migrated to *Saumar* area (easternmost part of ancient Assam) from Nepal, and, in course of time, came to be known as Morans.² 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, in course of time, came to be known as Morans.³

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.⁴ Endle assumes that a few centuries ago, three brothers named Moylang, Moran and Moyran inhabited in the Hukong valley at the upper reaches of the Chindwin river. While the eldest of them remained there, the youngest Moyran migrated to Nepal, and the second one Moran, crossed the Patkoi range, entered Assam and settled near the Tiphuk river of the Doomdooma region. The term 'Moran' thus came from the name of their progenitor.⁵ They are also sometimes called *Habungiyas*, i.e., earth-flock meaning the autochthones or the sons of the soil.

In the British records of the period, the term 'Moran' some times find a reference as a distinct tribe inhabiting the jungles,⁶ 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 northeast of Dibrugarh, 'where several *Gosain*' had their residence and which was inhabited by the Moran people.⁷ J. P. Wade, one of the earliest British officers, mentions the term 'Moran' to mean the rebels against the Ahom monarch.⁸ Any how, it appears to be a fact that it was after the name of the Moran tribe that the locality they inhabited 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 lying in between the Dibrugarh and Sibsagar districts of Assam. But very few Moran people are found in the present Moran sub-division, who, as mentioned above, predominantly live in the Doomdooma region of the Dibrugarh 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 Moran people came to be known as Matak. According to several Tai-Ahom and Assamese chronicles, like those of *Banhgaria Buragohain's Buranji*, which is included in the *Deodhai-Asam Buranji*, and *Asam Buranji from Khunlung-Khunlai to Arjun Dihingia R-ja*, incorporated in the *Satsari-Asam Buranji*,¹⁰ the Ahoms named the peoples they met, according to their physical traits or nature. In the Ahom language *Ma* means powerful (also scholar) and *Tak* means weighed or ex-

amed, i.e., a tested powerful man.¹¹ Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam, had to face a strong resistance from a section of the Morans, whom he ultimately overcame by a 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.¹²

There are, therefore, reasons to believe that impressed by the courage of the Morans, Sukapha and his followers might have named them as 'Mataks'. Late Golap Chandra Barua, the noted Tai-Ahom Linguist, found the term 'Matak' in several *buranjis* written in that language dealing with the events from the time of Sukapha till the end of the 16th century.¹³ The later Assamese chronicles like those of Kasinath Tamuli Phukan,¹⁴ and Harakanta Sarma Barua¹⁵ have clearly mentioned that the Mataks referred to in connection with Sukapha's encounter with the local tribes, were the Morans.

Incidentally, the word 'Matak' has a similar meaning among the Singphos and the Khamtis also. Following this, certain British Officers and historians like Robinson¹⁶ 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 Mataks used to inhabit the district of Lakhimpur (which included at that time the present Dibrugarh district as well), and that, they were so called by the Singphos, because they were found to be strong 'in contradiction of the *Mullong* or weak people'¹⁷ 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'¹⁸ which the Morans did and still now do actually possess.

Rajmchan Nath gives a different interpretation of the origin of the word '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 Austriacs, who after their assimilation with the Bodo tribes came to be known as the Morans.¹⁹ 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".²⁰ Gunabhiram Barua in his *Assam Buranji* uses the term 'Matak' while referring to Sukapha's confrontation with the tribes in Assam.²¹ All these indicate that the Morans, from the time of the advent of the Ahoms in Assam also came to be

known as the Matak.

It is another interesting study 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 a process of Aryanisation of the different Bodo 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*.²² 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 compromise 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, where *Jhum* (shifting) cultivation prevailed, 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 (Morans), were not distinguished from them by separate appellations. In the process, they also 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 members as well. Padmeswar 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.²³ In course of time, caste-Hindus who became members of this *Satra*, also identified them as Matak.

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 (Matak) 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 ; and many caste-Hindus, Brahmanas, Kayasthas and Kalitas were found among the Moamarias.²⁴

Their common bond of unity was their sect, i.e., the Mayamara sect, which developed through the Mayamara *Satra*, with the *Guru* as its head. But according to a 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 'Matak' is given in the *Mayamara Satrar Vamsawali*, which states that this name was first given to the disciples of the *Satra* by the Ahom king Susenpha alias Pratap Singha (1603-1641) after testing the unflinching obedience of the 'Matek' disciples to their *Gurus*.²⁵ Rajani Kanta Bordoloi, a well known Assamese scholar, supports this contention given by the *Vamsawali*, and further supports the view held by the *Satradhikars* of the *Mayamara Satra* that at a later period, the term 'Matek' was corrupted into 'Matak' in an insulting and derogatory sense.²⁶

This story, however, is not mentioned in any other contemporary source. Even then, there would have been no difficulty in accepting the contention, if the term 'Matak' would not have occurred in certain old *Buranjis* preceding the reign of Pratap Singha. Some scholars like P. Gogoi refute the above story by asserting that the combination of the words *Mat Ek* should have been *Matok* and not *Matek*.²⁷ Anyhow, our contention that the term 'Matak' comes from the name given by the Ahoms to the Morans, appears to be convincing.

Ethnic origin of the Morans

On the basis of racial and linguistic affinities, the Morans may be 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.²⁸ Further, in the *History of Assam*, Gait emphatically states that the Moran language was undoubtedly Bodo.²⁹ P. R. T. Gurdon furnishes some concrete linguistic evidences to prove the affinity of the Moran language with that of the Bodos. In his article 'Notes on the Morans'³⁰ he detailed a long list of such words, some of which are given below. During my visit to the Moran area, some words given below were found still prevalent among the Morans :

English	Moran	Kachari	Hodgson's Bodo(Mech)	Dimacha (or Hill Kachari).
One	Se	Se (Sui)	Che	Si
Two	Ne	Ne (nui)	Gai	Gini
Axe	Raoya	Rua	Rua	Roa
Buffalo	Manini/Michit	Moisya	Moishojola	Miship

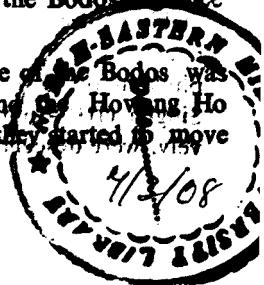
Bow	Kangphai	Zilit	Jilit	Baithuli
Bad	Hamiha	Hama	Hamma	Hamiya
Broom	Haiship	Hasip	..	Noship
Cow	Machan	Machan	Mushojo	Mushu
Crow	Daokha	Daokha	Daukha	Daokha
Cook (V)	Sogong	Sang-nu	..	Song
Cut (v)	Daula	Dau-nu	..	Gain, Dain
Cloth	Hinkha	Hi	Hi	Ri
Dog	Chaima	Suimai	Choima	Sisha
Elephant	Matma, Manima	..	Moidet	Miyang
Egg	Daodi	Daode	Doudoi	Daodi
Earth	Ha	Ha	Ha	Ha
Fish	Na	Na	Gna	Na
Father	Abai	Afa	Apha	Bofa
Fruit	Bithai	Fithai	Bethai	Bathai
Goat	Baruma	Barama	Burma	Barun
Monkey	Mukhara	Mokhra	Mokhora	Masgusa
Sickle	Khasi	Khasi	Kachi	Sougi
Tiger	Maochi, Michi	Mosa	Mocha	Misi
Water	Di	Dui (Doi)	Doi	Di

Grierson also, 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.³¹

Assamese scholars like Rajani Kanta Bordoloi³² and B. K. Barua³³ also support the Bodo origin of the Morans. Benudhar Sarma, and following him, Biradhar Das, however, do not accept the Bodo origin of the Morans. They have ascribed them to an Aryan origin.³⁴ 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 head-waters of the Yang-tse-kiang and the Hovang 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 Brahmaputra. The great Bodo tribe would appear to have been established over the valley of Brahmaputra fairly early, and to have extended into the North and East Bengal and thence into North Bihar.³⁵ B. K. Barua,³⁶ following Endle,³⁷ holds that the original home of the Morans (and the Bodos as well) was in western China near the Yang-tse-Kiang and the Howang-Ho rivers. The Morans who perhaps came a little later than the earliest streams of the Bodos, occupied a part of the extreme eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley, vacated by their predecessors. Therefore, the date of their migration may be a little later than that suggested by S. K. Chatterjee as 2000 B.C. for the Bodos. Thus there is no denying the fact that the Morans are one of the aboriginal peoples of the Brahmaputra valley.

The Morans, along with the Barahis, as has been mentioned, were the first tribe, whom Sukapha had to encounter in course of his march to the Brahmaputra valley. Though they then lay scattered within the area bounded by the rivers Buri Dihing in the north, Disang in the South, Suffry in the east and the Brahmaputra in the west, still they were united under their own chief Badaucha³⁸ who had his Headquarters at Kaktal.³⁹ Sukapha won over the Moran chief by diplomatic means.⁴⁰ Those sections of the Morans, who refused to surrender, were compelled to do so by force. According to *Purani Assam Buranji*, the headmen of these families were invited to participate in a feast, they were then made intoxicated and killed by Sukapha's men.⁴¹ Sukapha gradually managed to engage the Morans as fuel-suppliers and orchard-keepers.⁴² He also opened three Khats (estates) at Gachikala, Barakhwa and Engera and engaged many Morans in clearing lands for the purpose.⁴³

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 Lanmak-khru, as brinjal in Ahom language is called *makkhru*.⁴⁴ Lanmak-khru also rendered him great help in fighting the Nagas. In appreciation of this, Sukapha accepted him into the Ahom fold. Lanmak-khru became the progenitor of a distinct Ahom *phoid* or clan named after him. Haladhi Thenga and Bander, who were the Barphukans or Governors of Lower Assam in the reigns of Pratap Singha (1603-1641) and Sulikpah Lara Raja (1679-1681) respectively, were descendants of this clan.⁴⁵ Sukapha accepted another

Moran, Maimai Khiarat, a weigher by profession from Tipam, to his fold. His family was subsequently made *Patar* by Sukhampha Khora Raja (1553-1603). Later on, a family of this clan was taken to Tingkhang as *Hatimuria* by Chaopet Buragohain.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

In the reign of Suhungnung 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.⁴⁸

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 Barpatragohain⁴⁹ were selected 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 manpower 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.

Why the Morans, who had so long been extending their all co-operation to the success of the Ahom monarchy, had organised themselves into the first band of revolutionaries against it, so much so that the First Moamaria Rebellion is called in some chronicles⁵⁰ as the Moran Rebellion, forms an important chapter of the history of Assam. But this falls beyond the perview of this article.

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