

The Sikhs and the Matakas :

A Comparative Study

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The Matakas living in the extreme north-east and the Sikhs living in the north-west of India surprisingly and incidentally have many similarities in the history of the growth of their religion, society and culture. They had also a striking similarity in the political evolution and establishment of their own independent kingdoms after being compelled to confront the then reigning powers in their respective territories. Otherwise peaceful, both these people were compelled by the then political situation to transform themselves into organised religious communities and powerfully unified militant bodies. The cumulative effect of politico-economic exploitation and religious persecution of some venerated *Gurus* and many devoted prominent disciples of both the communities by the despotic rulers in their respective areas forced them to raise the banner of protest and revolt culminating in the ultimate establishment of independent political identity and entity in their respective territories.

The Matakas owe their origin to Aniruddhadeva, a prominent exponent of the Bhakti Movement in Assam and one of the worthy successors and followers of Sankaradeva, the father of Neo-Vaisnavite Bhakti Movement of Assam. The Sikhs likewise owe their origin and identity to Guru Nanak, one of the most prominent exponents of the Bhakti Movement in India. Initially both the Matakas and the Sikhs were satisfied with their democratic and peaceful religious workings and set-ups. But when as saviours of the depressed castes and classes, they became extremely popular and powerful in their own jurisdictions, both of them had to face the challenge of the then reigning powers - Matakas facing the Ahom Government in Assam and the Sikhs facing the mighty Mughals of Delhi in the Punjab. These reigning powers were determined to nip these powerful religious communities in the bud, as they considered these organised groups as states within the state. This resulted in the persecution of several *Gurus* and prominent disciples of both the communities. As a result, in course of time both the Sikhs and the Matakas transformed themselves into powerful organised militant bodies to preserve their own faiths and existence. This led in Assam to a challenge to the mighty despotic Ahom Government in the later half of the 18th century by the Matakas which is popularly known as the Moamaria Rebellion in the history of Assam. Four Matak kingdoms were established independently after dealing mortal blows to the Ahom government, out of which

only one ultimately survived that could extract recognition from the restored Ahom regime in 1805 A.D. This Matak Kingdom in Upper Assam was recognised by the British too only to be annexed by them in 1839 A.D.

Similarly the Sikh community, which was born out of the religious preachings of Guru Nanak and his successors, had to carry a continuous struggle against the oppressive and intolerant ones of the Mughal rulers. Basing on the strong religious concept and community feeling initiated by Guru Nanak which was further strengthened by his successors, the Sikhs could successfully withstood the prowess and persecution of the mighty Mughals. On this very foundation Banda Bahadur in the first half of the eighteenth century and later on Ranjit Singh in the first half of the 17th century could unify the powerful Sikhs and establish a Sikh state in the Punjab. Like in the case of the Matak, the Sikhs too initially had friendly relationship with the British during the reign of Ranjit Singh, but succumbed ultimately to the British imperialists during the days of his successors. Thus both the kingdoms, of course under different situations and periods, were annexed by the British.

The similarity of these two communities could even draw attention of historians like Dr. S. K. Bhuyan and others. Dr. Bhuyan remarked ↓ :

The transformation of the Moamarias (Mataks) into a military body has its parallel, though in a much larger scale, in that of the Sikhs, who contributed to the subversion of Mughal authority in India. In both cases the fighting element in their sectarian organisations was introduced as a result of the clash of the Gurus with Government of the land.

Though the causes of discontentment and revolt by the two communities has been oversimplified by Dr. Bhuyan, now it has become an acknowledged fact that many other causes like social, economic and political, were responsible for the upheaval caused by these two communities, although the symbol and platform of their unity were their *Gurus* and the religious institutions.

It should be mentioned here that though Guru Nanak was contemporary of Sankardeva, the founder of Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam and they preached more or less in the same period with almost similar religious principles and ideologies, the similarity of the various aspects of the Sikh community with those of the Matak became prominent with greater intensity and nearness with the foundation of the Mayamara vaisnava *satra* by Aniruddhadeva (1553-1626 A.D.). He started preaching from 1601 A.D. and more or less was contemporary of Guru Amar Das (1479-1574), Guru Ram Das (1534-1581), Guru Arjun (1563-1606) and Guru Har Govind (1575-1644). The similarity in religious and political happenings became further prominent during the period of the successors of Aniruddhadeva and the successors of Guru Nanak. Subject being a vast one, we now proceed to sketch the similarity or otherwise of only some important aspects of these two communities.

Several Indian saints in different parts of the country during the fifteenth century started a movement in India known as the 'Bhakti Movement'. With some differences in details, all these saint-reformers were exponents of the liberal Bhakti cult, the message of which they sought to carry before unlettered masses. They preached the fundamental equality of all religions and the unity of Godhood, held that the dignity of man depended on his actions and not on his birth, protested against excessive ritualism and formalities of religion and domination of the priests, and emphasised simple devotion and faith as the means of salvation for one and all.² Several of those great reformers who led the crusade against the social and religious evils of the time founded sects which still survive. One of them was Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism and the reviver of the pure monotheistic doctrine. Sankardeva did the same great thing in Assam which was continued by his worthy successors like Madhavdeva and Gopaldeva. Aniruddhdeva, the founder of the Mayamara vaisnavism, was another such reformer who was a true follower of Sankardeva and who contributed tremendously towards popularising monotheism and establishing a sect of society based on casteless, democratic and egalitarian principles.

Guru Nanak has been regarded as a great social revolutionary who preached liberal social doctrines.³ Aniruddhdeva can rightly be given the same place in Assam who also preached and practised liberal social doctrines. In the words of Pinckott, "Nanak taught that all men are equal before God. . . . all are equal both in race and in creed, in political rights and religious aspirations."⁴ He declared social status on the basis of birth, existing institutions of class gradation and untouchability as indefensible and against the will of God. These democratic principles based on social equality made Sikhism extremely popular, particularly among the depressed classes in the society and attracted them to its fold. In the same way the Mayamara *satra* did great service to the Assamese society by accepting members of the depressed classes, castes and tribes to its fold and placing them on an equal footing with members of the so-called higher castes. Dr. S. K. Bhuyan rightly points out :⁵

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.

Thus both the Sikhs and the Mataks were born as egalitarian democratic societies based upon the religious preachings of the founding Gurus and their equally worthy and capable successors. Like Nanak initiating Muslims as disciples, Aniruddhdeva also initiated first a Muslim tailor named Dheli Darji giving him absolutely equal and honourable status.

Guru Nanak taught that asceticism or abandonment of the world was unnecessary, the pious hermit and the devout householder being equal in the eyes of the Almighty. Nanak who very often left his family to propagate his mission, always came back to

his home and lived among the common people as one of them.⁶ Similarly, Aniruddhadeva and his successors never advocated asceticism and all of them preached while pursuing life of normal house-holders.

Gopaldeva, the *Guru* of Aniruddhadeva, enunciated the doctrine of Guruvada in Neo-vaisnavism which was strongly propagated by Aniruddhadeva. The *Guru* in *Mayamara Satra* occupies the same exalted position as that one in Sikhism. Nanak made the institution of *Guru* the pivot of his religious system. Without the *Guru* there could be no salvation. But the *Guru*, insisted Nanak, was to be regarded as guide and not as god. He was to be consulted and respected but not worshipped. But in course of time his position was greatly elevated to godship. In *Mayamara Satra* different circumstances necessitated the elevation of *Guru* to god. Being accustomed to worship some concrete objects so long, the common people could not grasp immediately the philosophy of Neo-Vaisnavism propagated by Aniruddhadeva. To meet this problem, the *Guru* himself was considered as the *Murti* or image of god, and Aniruddhadeva being the first *Guru* was thus conceived as the *Adyamurti* (The Primal Image). It may, however, be mentioned here that unlike many other vaisnava *satras* of Assam, the *Mayamara Satra* did never have and has no *Bigraha* worship (image worship). The honour was always given to their *gurus* or the scriptures written by them specially the *Adyasastra* (the first *Sastra* composed by Aniruddhadeva). The Sikhs similarly never have any image worship and this honour was always given to the Granth Sahib, the main religious scripture of the Sikhs. The veneration shown to the *Adyasastra* by the Mataks can invariably be compared with the veneration shown by the Sikhs to the Granth Sahib.

As the disciples considered the *Gurus* as the living embodiment of God and hence immortal, the chair of guruship also, under no circumstances could lie vacant. When the guru died, the Mataks used to consider that he simply assumed a new form in that of his successor. Similarly, the Sikhs fully believed the spirit of Nanak to have been incarnate in each succeeding *Guru*.⁸

The nomination to Guruship "is a fact of the pro-foundest significance in Sikh History."⁹ Nanak appointed Angad (Lahna), one of his devoted disciples, as his successor in preference to his two sons who deviated from the teachings of their father. In Angad's succession Nanak did establish the precedent through which could be established a community beyond the ties of family based on democratic principle and efficiency. However, with the accession of *Guru Hargobind* the office had become hereditary not strictly based on the principle of primogeniture. In the entire line of *Guru* only three sons succeeded their fathers in their turn.¹⁰ The succession to Guruship in the Mataks also is quite democratic, where the *Dekadhikar* (would be guru) is appointed by the *Guru* with the approval of the community. But the *Matak* guruship is almost hereditary based generally on the principle of primogeniture and seniority with, of course, a few exceptions. As under no circumstances the guruship can lie vacant, if the *Dekadhikar* is out

of station at the time of the demise of the *Guru*, the senior most eligible member of the *Guru's* family was made the *Guru* even if it violates the principle of primogeniture and seniority.

The institution of Langar (free and common kitchen) started by *Guru Angad* was a distinctive feature of the Sikhs to which were invited guests and friends to eat with him and his disciples as one family, regardless of race, wealth, sex, caste, occupation and religion. The *Mataks* also might have had this system initially but is not found now. The common eating of course is still prevalent in case of *Prasada* (non-cooked food) in the public congregation of the *Matak* community where all irrespective of age, sex, caste and position eat together

Guru Amar had introduced new ceremonies for birth and death and asked the Sikhs to perform these ceremonies differently from those of the Hindus, which were very orthodox and expensive. He denied the practice of calling Hindu priests for the performance of these ceremonies, which now became very simple and inexpensive. Similarly, the *Matak gurus* also did not introduce the Brahmanical ceremonies in case of birth, death and marriage with minor exceptions to the high caste followers, who were numerically microscopic in the community. *Guru Nanak* accepted the path of *bhakti* (devotion) laying emphasis on the worship of the Name (*Namamara*ga).¹² *Nanak* said, "I have no miracles except the name of God."¹³ So in all ceremonies of the Sikh community, recitation of Hymns of the *Gurus* got top and only priority. Similarly in the *Matak* Community also *Namaḳirtan* (recitation of the name of God) and *Gryan-Bayan*, a community orchestral performance with hymns composed by the *gurus* predominated in all functions of the community.

Unlike Hindu temples, which had only the entrance, *Guru Arjun* (1563-1606) had the *Harmandir* open on all four sides indicating symbolically that its doors were ever open to all.¹⁴ The *Granth Sahib* is placed in the middle of the Sikh temple, so that no man, whatever may be his position, may sit himself in its place.¹⁵ The *Mayamara Namghars* or the community prayer halls also do not have any enclosure. Like in the Sikh temples, in *Maymara Namghars* also, the *Adyasastra* is placed in the middle of the *Namghar* and then is recited by the *Pathekis*, like the *granthis* of the Sikh community, with highest veneration.

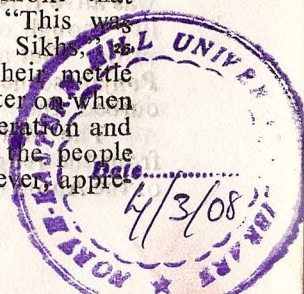
Guru Nanak was primarily a religious preacher and an up-lifter of society. Active politics was not his field.¹⁶ *Guru Nanak* did not attach divinity to the office of the king though he believed that it was the gift of God. According to *Guru Nanak*, if the ruler's orders were against justice and equity, it was not obligatory on the people to honour them; and herein lay the seeds of defiance and challenge to the authority of an unjust ruler.¹⁷ Though he was keenly aware of the Muslim domination in politics of the country, he did not condemn the rulers as Muslims. His sympathies or aversions definitely cut across sectarian or communal barriers.¹⁸

Similarly, the *Mayamara Gurus* were also religious preachers and social reformers and never actively involved in politics. It can

be mentioned here that while the *Deka-Mahanta*, the son of the then Mayamara *Mahanta* Astabhujudeva (1748-1770) prepared for revolting against the Ahom Government because of excessive oppression let loose by Kirtichandra Barbarua, the royal official of king Rajeswar Singha, the *Mahanta* intervened and dissuaded his son from resorting to violence.¹⁹ His advice not to take arms against the Ahom monarchy indicates that he was not against the system of monarchy as such, but against the evils of monarchy and oppressions of the officials. His support to the Ahom monarchy, inspite of his not belonging to the Ahom Community, cut across sectarian or communal barriers like that of the Sikh Gurus. The permission to fight against the oppression of the Ahom regime by the Mayamara *Mahanta* definitely contained the seeds of defiance and challenge to the authority of an unjust rule in the Moamaria Rebellion.

Excessive popularity of Sikhism aroused hostility in different corners like the Brahmins and the Qazis. This led to complain against Guru Amar Das (1479-1574) to the Mughal Emperor Akbar. This hostile attempt did not succeed when on hearing the religious views of the Guru, the Emperor showed his likings for the Sikh religion and refused to interfere with it.²⁰ Similarly, when the Maymara *satra* became excessively popular it attracted the hostile attention of the Ahom monarchy. The Ahom king Sukampha Khora Raja (1552-1603) summoned Aniruddhadeva to the court who could somehow convince the hing of his missionary work. The king was satisfied and permitted him to carry on his work. The Mayamara *satra* thus survived the first test of its existence conspired by the Brahminical elements.²¹

Guru Ram Das (1534-1581), the successor of Guru Amar Das, was also favoured by Akbar. The death of Akbar brought a sudden reversal in the policy of toleration of the state towards the Sikhs. The growing popularity of Guru Arjun (1563-1606) and his inability to abstain wholly from the political heppenings of the time in the form of partisan attitude to the Mughal prince Khushrau, who was in rebellion against his father Jahangir, led to his execution.²² As Guru Arjun was extremely popular, he was considered as the first martyar and in his blood had sown the seed of the militant Sikh church as well as of the Punjabi nation.²³ Infact the persecution of the Sikh faith by the Mughal Emperors may be said to date from Guru Arjun's martyardom. A new era of militancy began in the history of the Sikhs with the accession to the Guruship of Guru Hargobind (1595-1644), the son of Guru Arjun.²⁴ A conflict between him and the Mughal Government became inevitable which brkoe out after Shahjahan's accession to the Mughal throne that caused defeat of the imperial force near Amritsar.²⁵ "This was the first combat in the annals of the Punjab and the Sikhs."²⁶ The fighting spirit of the Sikhs having been roused and their mettle proved, they became a power to be reckoned with. Later on when Aurangzeb had embarked on a policy of religious intolerance and persecution,²⁷ Guru Teg Bahadur (1621-1675) exhorted the people to stand firm against forcible conversion. He was, however, appre-



hended and executed. Infact the execution of Guru Teg Bahadur proved a baptism of fire. It helped his son and successor Guru Govind Singh (1666-1708) to transform the Sikhs into the fiery warriors as they proved themselves in the 18th century.²⁸ Throughout his life Govind Singh fought against the oppression of the Mughals with great success. The cold-blooded murder of his innocent children had given a serious shock to the Sikhs. After the death of Guru Govind Singh the Sikhs soon developed into political power under the leadership of Banda Singh. Banda Singh assumed royal authority and issued coins in the names of Guru Nanak and Guru Govind Singh.

Banda Singh's brief rule gave the Sikhs a taste of independence and from that time onward they could not be satisfied with anything short of the emancipation of their territory from the Mughal yoke, in pursuit of which they launched a ceaseless struggle against the Mughal government of the Punjab, and later against the Afghan usurpers from across the Indus.²⁹ In the words of Teja Singh (and Ganda Singh), during Banda Singh's period "A will was created in the ordinary masses to resist tyranny and to live and die for a national cause"³⁰ Infact his struggle assumed the form of a class struggle of the tenants on the one side and the Zamindars on the other.³¹ The struggle of the Sikhs, however, was against the oppression of the Mughal Govt. but not against the Muslim people.³² Setting aside the partisan criticism on Banda Singh, it must be admitted that his followers were undoubtedly guilty of savagery, but his movement was clearly an agrarian revolt and not an anti-Islamic crusade.³³ Another important point to be noted is the participation of the Sikh women in the historic struggle of their nation. In the words of William Franklin, "Instances indeed have not unfrequently occurred in which they (women) have actually taken up arms to defend their habitations, from the desultory attacks of the enemy; and throughout the contest, behaved themselves with an intrepidity of spirit, highly praiseworthy".³⁴

After Banda Singh's death the constant struggle of the Sikhs with the Mughals and the Pathans ultimately resulted in the occupation of the Punjab by the Sikhs about the middle of the sixties of the 18th century. Later on Ranjit Singh, the great Maharaja of the Punjab, laboured to give unity and coherence to diverse atoms and scattered elements of the Sikhs and succeeded in moulding it into a well-ordered Sikh state or commonwealth. But before he could complete the work the British imperialists arrived in the scene. They established amity with him in order to deal with the other turbulent forces like the Marathas. So long Ranjit Singh was alive this relationship of amity continued on a footing of equality though on some occasions, the Sikh hero was to swallow his pride. But as soon as this giant personality disappeared from the Punjab scene and the forces like the Marathas were successfully curbed, the British gradually annexed the whole of Punjab.

The Matakas after its first test of survival continued to suffer from the religious and social persecution and oppression of many of the Ahom monarchs. The rigidity of the *Paik* System introduced

by king Pratap Singh (1603-1641) restricting movement of the common people and defining a strict standard of living for them created discontentment among the people specially the Matakaks who used to enjoy unlimited personal liberty in their erstwhile tribal structure and in democratic set up of their *Satras*. The Ahom monarch Surampha (1641-44) executed the Mayamara Mahanta Nityanandadeva on a flimsy pretext. The news of the barbarous slaughter of their esteemed Guru greatly infuriated the Matak people. Gadhadhar Singha (1681-96) executed the 7th Guru of the Mayamara *Satra* in 1691 A.D. along with many prominent disciples of the *Satra*. Rudra Singh (1696-1714), who succeeded Gadhadhar Singha, added fuel to the fire by insulting Chaturbhujadeva, the 8th *Guru* of the Matakaks. After Rudra Singh's death Saktism was patronised and promoted in the royal court that started a period of religious intoleration and persecution of the Vaisnava *Satras* specially the Mayamara *satra*. In the meantime a royal official named Kirtichandra Barbarua, basking in the royal favour, started a reign of terror for the Matakaks as was done by Wajir Khan of Sirhind and other Mughal officials in the case of the Sikhs.

Unable to tolerate these oppressions and religious persecutions, the Matakaks ultimately revolted during the reign of the Ahom monarch, captured the Ahom capital, placed one of their nominees on the Ahom throne, only to be dethroned shortly. The restored Ahom regime adopted a policy of vigorous persecution. Thousands of Matak people including their guru Astabhujadeva and their popular leader the Deka Mahanta were executed. As a result, they revolted twice in the reign of Gaurinath Singha, who was ultimately compelled to flee away to seek help from the Britishers for his restoration. The Matakaks established a kingdom in upper Assam known as the Matak Rajya which could extract recognition from the restored Ahom regime as well as the British Government. The British after its annexation of Assam established cordial relationship with Sarbananda Singha, the Matak ruler. But as soon as the danger of foreign aggression from Burma was over and as soon as the turbulent Hill Tribes in the north-east were suppressed, the Matak kingdom was annexed by the British in 1839 A. D.

The success of the Matakaks, though shortlived, had a great significance in the history of Assam. It was the first successful challenge to the despotic Ahom monarchy. It was also the first time that commoners were placed on the Ahom throne that claimed divinity. The Rebellion of the Matakaks brought forth all the discontented dormant elements into action everywhere against the Ahom regime. This encouraged centrifugal forces to assert their rights specially in Darrang and Kamrup, where people had long standing grievances in political and socio-economic spheres against the Ahom regime. Though with the help of the army modelled on the British line, the capable Ahom premier Purnanada Buragohain succeeded in quelling certain internal disturbances, the Government had to yield to many demands of the people like the right to

demand dismissal of officials.³⁵ Certain privileges, which were earlier monopolised only by the privileged few, were now made open to all. Further this is for first time that many Matak women actively and equally participated in politics and battles with the Matak menfolk against the Ahom regime.

But it must be borne in mind that the Mataks were never crusaders fighting for a religious cause only, although the symbol and the platform of their unity like those of Sikhs were their *Guru* and the *Satra* respectively. It is of course true that the Rebellion started on a religious pretext but its motive was never aimed against a particular creed. It is again a fact that the subjects other than the Mataks had also suffered equally under the Ahom regime. The standard of rebellion and warfare was raised by the Mataks first because they were strongly organised around the platform of the *Satras* centering around their guru. That subsequently other people also, who were not disciples of the Mayamara *Satra*, joined the Mataks, prove that there was general discontentment against the government, which made it a socio-political movement made by the people and for the people.³⁶

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