Making and Unmaking ‘Matak’ and ‘Moran’ Identities in Assam: A Case Study on Ethnicity

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Abstract

In Northeastern India, conflicts between nationalities and communities are academically labeled as ethnic conflicts, whereas such a group’s quest for framing a distinct identity and consequent collective mobilization of its members are branded as ethnic assertion or movement. The terms ethnic communities, tribes and nationalities are frequently used as inter-exchangeable expressions. In the context of India, it can be noticed that while some of the ethnic groups have been officially recognized as ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (ST) by the state, some others have been left out due to various reasons. In this context, the proposed study will explore the genesis and the issues of growing political consciousness and subsequent consolidation of ethnicity among the ‘Matak’ community which is concentrated mainly in the districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sibsagar in Upper Assam, and the ‘Moran’ community which inhabits Tinsukia district.

Key Words: Ethnic, Identity, Matak, Moran, Northeastern India, Scheduled Tribes.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Mataks and the Morans are well known in the political history of Assam as the authors of the historic Moamoria Rebellion of the 18th Century. This Rebellion paved the way for the decline and fall of the Ahom Monarchy by breaking its backbone both economically and militarily. Almost half of the population of Upper Assam ceased to exist after this civil war. The prolonged political unrest triggered internal power rivalry among the Royal officials as the reigning Monarchs lost their former dignified status and power who claimed their divine ancestry as “Swargadeos”.1 Gaurinath Singha, the contemporary Swargadeo had to seek military assistance from the British East India Company of Bengal to pacify the Mataks, which shattered the myth of ‘divinity’ bestowed upon the more than five hundred years old Monarchy. Those political upheavals culminated in the disastrous Burmese invasions and occupation of Assam (1817-25), and the subsequent colonization of the valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Barak in the aftermath of British military intervention (1824-25) to drive away the Burmese. The semi-autonomous Matak Rajya (Matak territory) which was formed in 1805 as an outcome of the prolonged protracted Rebellion, was recognized by the both Ahom and the Burmese authorities, and then by the British Regime initially. However, under the pretext of Matak-Moran rivalry, the territory was finally annexed by the colonizers in 1839 because its land was considered as very suitable for tea production by the British planters who introduced a capitalist economic tradition in the region. Subsequently the territory became a part of the newly
constituted Lakhimpur district (1842) of Assam. Colonization of the territory of the Mataks was immediately followed by a process of land alienation of the local inhabitants in the hands of British planters and a section of North-Indian traders who worked in close cooperation with the colonial masters. The Moran section of the Mataks was the worst suffers of this capitalist expansion because they were geographically concentrated in those places of the territory which were selected by the planters for tea cultivation. Moreover, the migratory nature of the Morans inhabiting the Ujoni Matak (Upper Matak) due to their practice of Jhum (shifting) cultivation was another reason which prompted the outsiders to grab more land in the region, as the latter found large swathes of fellow land beside the Moran habitats. On the other hand, the situation was not so grave in the territory of Namoni Matak (Lower Matak), which was inhabited by the rest of the Mataks (excluding the ethnic Morans) as they were habituated with permanent settlement that involves plough-based Sali (a variety of wet-rice) cultivation. These ‘non-Moran’ Mataks of the lower tract proved to be more accommodative with the changes brought by colonial political-economy as compared to the geographically isolated and culturally conservative Morans. Such accommodation was made possible by the presence of the Princely Matak family, a section of Ahoms and some Caste-Hindus in the lower tract, which was situated between the rivers of Burhi Dihing and Brahmaputra. These initial disparities in the range of ‘modernization’ between the two sections would pave the way for the emergence of sub-ethnic assertions among the greater community. It resulted in the creation of a complicated but volatile ethno-political boundary between the Morans and the Mataks.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study basically has adopted historical, descriptive and analytical methods to understand and explore the complicated process of ethnic identity formation among the Mataks and the Morans. The study involves consultation of both the primary and the secondary data. Primary sources have included periodical mouthpieces and souvenirs published by the organizations associated with the Mataks and the Morans. Furthermore, personal interviews with the individuals concerned, memorandums submitted to the government and some other official reports/statements have constituted a part of the primary sources.

III. MATAK-MORAN RELATIONS: MOBILE BOUNDARIES OF ETHNICITY

“The concept of boundary does not necessarily imply that the world is composed of sharply bounded groups……ethnic distinctions may be fuzzy and boundaries soft, with unclear demarcations and few social consequences, allowing individuals to maintain membership in several categories or switch identities situationally. The concept of boundary does not imply closure and clarity, which vary in degree from one society, social situation, or institutional context to another.”

The above statement by Andreas Wimmer portrays the dynamic and flexible nature of the endeavour of ‘ethnic boundary making’ between various sectional groups inhabiting within a broader societal structure. Such murky and soft boundaries of ethnicity, according to Wimmer, enable individuals to retain variety of identities
simultaneously, and also to shift their ethnic identities to a relatively advantageous category as per the necessity of the situation. Group identities, therefore, are not essentially exclusive of one another until the ethnic boundaries become hard and politically formulated. Whenever the existing ethnic boundaries transmute from soft entities to hard and definite ones, they emerge as significant source of political unity and mobilization. These politically formulated and manipulated identities, however, are the external portrayal of ethnic boundaries. The internal boundaries of ethnicity are relatively less exclusive which may include several sub groups within a single broader group. The extent to which a regional ethnic or cultural group perceives its identity as essentially associated with a larger ethnic collectivity, to that extent the former can be regarded as a sub-group or sub-culture of the latter.

Accordingly in the context of the Matak-Moran connection of Assam, it can be perceived that the extent to which the Morans see themselves as a sub-group within the Mataks (the broader political collectivity) – the ‘identity’ of Morans to that extent is associated with that of ‘Matak’. At the dawn of 1960s, however, the majority of the Moran leaders appeared to be reluctant to see their group politically as a part of the larger collectivity. They went on to portray the Morans as a distinct ethnic group or tribe which had its own ‘past’ and distinct cultural traits, rather than being a mere sectional group of the Mataks. It was aimed at reformulating the political identity of Morans by separating the group from the rest of the ethnic Mataks. The year 1965 marked a watershed in the ethnic history of greater Matak community. That year the formation of Asom Moran Sabha (AMS) paved the way for organizational defection of Morans from All Assam Matak Sammilan (AAMS).8 The process of this separation was completed in 1968, after three years of the formation of AMS, when the Moran student leaders who had hitherto been working under the banner of All Assam Matak Yuba Chatra Sammilan (AAMYCS), formed their own mouth-piece organization namely Moran Chatra Sabha (Association of Moran Students) which would later become All Moran Students’ Union (AMSU).9 There were various underlying causes behind the defection of Morans from the ethnic Mataks. It may be noticed that when the prolonged internal rivalry between the Matak Princely family (‘Chutia’ by ethnicity) and the ethnic Morans became unconcealed in the late 1830s, the Morans under the auspicious of Narabhuj, the erstwhile satradhikar of Tipuk Satra and their village headmen, urged the British Government to liberate them from the hands of Bhagirath Maju Gohain, the last ruler of Matak territory.10 Nababhuji’s father and predecessor Krishnabhuj, the first satradhikar of the ethnic Morans, was ousted from his position by Sarbananda Singha, the first ruler of the joint Matak-Moran, as the satradhikar had been accused of being disloyal towards the Matak Princely family. In fact, the majority of the Morans were never sincerely loyal towards the Princely family of Mataks, because they considered Sarbananda Singha as a usurper only. The internal rivalry between the Mataks and the ethnic Morans provided the British Government with the most wanted opportunity to annex the entire territory of the Mataks into their empire in 1839.11 The socio-cultural differences between the two groups persisted throughout the colonial era. These two groups, however, for a prolonged period (1939-64) together worked under the banner of AAMS and AAMYCS. During this period, albeit prevalence of certain socio-cultural binaries between the Mataks and the Morans, at organizational level, the leaders from both the groups maintained that they belonged to a single ethnic collectivity. The origin of this sense of unity can be
traced back to their historic Rebellion against the Ahom Regime in the late 18th and early 19th Century, and thereafter also to the formation and existence of a semi-autonomous Matak territory in Upper Assam (1805-39). With the passage of time, however, the Moran leaders developed a tendency to constitute their own mouth-piece organizations to address certain socio-political grievances and issues of the sub-group separately and subsequently began to introduce themselves as a distinct ethnic group or tribe. It must be, however, noticed that a small number of Morans are still working under the banners of AAMS and AAMYCS, who introduce themselves as Mataks, and thereby makes the endeavor of drawing an ethnic boundary between the two communities a murky and contested affair. Such confusions are naturally perceived as obstacles by the activists associated with the group in securing a desirable political recognition from the state. Therefore, since the defection of the majority of Morans from AAMS and AAMYCS, the remaining ‘ethnic core’ among the Mataks has been immensely emphasizing on appropriating the socio-cultural and political history of the greater community. Such appropriations and new inventions of the ‘ethnic past’ in the context of the present ethno-political landscape of Assam have been largely aimed at bridging the instability and intra-group vacuum caused by the departure of Morans. Furthermore, it is essentially aimed at creating a politically advantageous sub-identity for the Mataks which will suit the legal-constitutional provisions of the state.

It is worth mentioning the ethnic boundary between the Mataks and the Morans was largely demarcated by their socio-cultural division in terms of two historic categorizations namely the “Mokolial Matak”, i.e. Mataks from the Mukoli (denotes ‘open areas’ in Assamese) and the “Habitolia Moran” (Morans from ‘Habi’ which means ‘jungles’ in Assamese). These two groups of Mataks have been historically showing their loyalty towards two different branches of the Mayamara Satras which are situated in two different regions which once constituted the territories of Namoni Matak and the Ujoni Matak respectively. Currently the Mayamara Satras that are divided between the Mataks and the Morans, are popularly known as Namonir Mayamara Satra (Mayamara Satras of lower tract) and Ujonir Mayamara Satra (Mayamara Satras of upper tract) respectively. The latter is also known as Tipuk Sakha (Tipuk branch) of Mayamara Vaishnavism. Although all of these Satras are the followers of the same sectarian ideology propagated by Aniruddhadeva, there are certain differences between the two branches in terms of religious and cultural traditions. This prevailing cultural binary is one among the factors which are playing a vital role in demarcating the ethnic boundary between the Mataks and the Morans. The origin of this ethno-religious categorization can be traced back to the days of Moamaria Rebellion. The first category excluding the ethnic Morans currently refers to the rest of the Mataks. The category also includes those Morans who politically introduce themselves as ‘Matak’.

Today Mataks and the Morans are mainly concentrated in the districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sibsagar. AAMS has revealed that 77 villages of Dibrugarh district are predominantly inhabited by Mataks. Moreover, 35 villages of Tinsukia district and 18 villages of Sibsagar district are inhabited by the ethnic group. According to a survey conducted by AAMS, the present population of the group is more than 2 million. The term ‘Habitolia Moran’ on the other hand, refers to the ‘ethnic Morans’ who currently do not introduce themselves as...
‘Matak’ politically.\textsuperscript{15} This group is mainly concentrated in the present Tinsukia district and in the frontier regions of Lohit and Namsai districts of Arunachal Pradesh, which share border with the district of Tinsukia.\textsuperscript{16} The present study has made an attempt to understand the political implications this volatile ethnic binary between the Mataks and the Moans.

IV. THE BIRTH OF ‘ASOM MORAN SABHA’ AND ‘ALL MORAN STUDENTS’ UNION’: TWO MOVES TOWARDS DEFECTION

Asom Moran Sabha (AMS), the first mouth-piece organization of the ethnic Morans, was born on November 28, 1965 in Kakopather, (situated in the present day Tinsukia district). Initially it was named as ‘Moran Sabha, Asom’.\textsuperscript{17} Certain socio-cultural differences between the Mataks and the Morans were instrumental in the birth of this organization. AMS was constituted under the auspicious of Tipuk Satra Dharmasabha (Tipuk Satras’ Religious Assembly), an umbrella organization of all the Mayamara Satras having only Moran disciples, and under the chairmanship of Lihing Chandra Mahanta, the erstwhile satradhikar of the Mayamara Lajum Satra.\textsuperscript{18} It may be noticed that formerly Mahanta presided over the 2nd session of the Moran-Matak Sanmilan (MMS), a joint meeting of the Mataks and the Morans held in November, 1939 at Tingrai (situated in present day Tinsukia district).\textsuperscript{19} Mohan Chandra Saikia, then general secretary of Tipuk Satra Dharmasabha, was the chief organizer of this inaugural meeting of AMS. The meeting was aimed at addressing some specific socio-economic issues of the Morans. Saikia became the founder general secretary of AMS, and shouldered this responsibility for long 14 years since 1965 to 1979. This inaugural meeting of AMS which excluded the rest of the ethnic Mataks, adopted a resolution which maintained that “Morans are one of the most backward groups of Assam which is an ancient and aboriginal community of the region. This community has its own specific problems and grievances. Therefore, to address and solve these problems and grievances an organization namely ‘Moran Sabha’ has been formed in this meeting”.\textsuperscript{20}

It is worth-mentioning that both the organizer and the president of the meeting came from the Religious Assembly of the Mayamara Tipuk Satras, which essentially belongs to the ethnic Morans. Thus, both the sectarian and ethnic elites of Moran society worked in collaboration to construct a specific socio-political platform for the Morans in the form of AMS. In the case of Moran society, however, even currently the ‘ethnic’ traits tend to overlap with the ‘sectarian’ traits, because unlike the ethnic Mataks, for the former, their satras and satradhikars have always been an inalienable part of the Moran identity.

It can be noticed that unlike the satradhikars of the Mataks who belong to the ‘General’ category (marker of Upper Caste) in government parlance, the satradhikars of Tipuk branch and their families have been categorized as MOBC (More Other Backward Classes) by the government along with the rest of the Morans.\textsuperscript{21} The Mayamara Satras situated among the ethnic Morans of Tinsukia district, have been one of the ‘markers’ of ‘Moran ethnicity’ till date. Moreover, the families of satradhikars living among the Moran people have been traditionally avoiding
the practice of caste hierarchy in the socio-cultural arena. Unlike several other satras of Assam which have retained socially hierarchical relations between the spiritual mentor and the disciples, the families of the satradhikars living among the Morans do not hesitate to build even marriage relationship with their Moran disciples. Only due to the prevalence of such egalitarian socio-cultural practices, the Mayamara Tipuk Satras of Tinsukia district even in this 21st Century are regarded as an unavoidable part of the Moran society, and these satras have been closely associated with the politics of ethnic mobilization among the Morans. This existing harmony between the ethnic and sectarian values among the Moran society is a crucial feature which distinguishes the Morans from the rest of the Mataks, because under the auspicious of AAMS, the appropriated ethnography has prohibited the entry of Mayamara Satras into the arena of ethnic identity of Mataks. The appropriated ethnography on Mataks maintains that “the Matak community as an aboriginal group of Assam precedes the formation of Mayamara Sect”. In contrast, the ethnic mouth-piece organizations of Morans since their inception have always been inclusive of the satras having Moran disciples. For instance, Lihing Chandra Goswami, the satradhikar, who presided over the inaugural meeting of Moran Sabha in November, 1965, is regarded by the Morans as one of the first persons from the community to pass Entrance Examination (Matric) in the year 1921, along with Ghanakanta Moran, who served as the founding general secretary of MMS (1938), the erstwhile joint mouth-piece body of the two groups. The Moran leaders initially thought of conducting the activities AMS as a ‘sister-organization’ of AAMS, the parent organization of the Matak community. But in practice, AMS since its inception has been working only as a mouth-piece body of Morans. Instead of seeking recognition as a ‘tribe’ for the joint Matak-Morans, AMS raised the same demand only for the Moran section. On the other hand, the remaining Matak leaders of AAMS now decided to address only the socio-political issues and grievances of the ethnic Mataks excluding its Moran section at large. Both the inclusive and exclusive courses of the ethnic journey of Mataks across the colonial and the post-colonial days, therefore, have been determined by the elite section of the two groups in line with the idioms of the prevailing socio-political contexts. Cultural values, forms and practices have become means for them in contest for economic advantages and political power. They have started defining, redefining and manipulating the cultural resources to formulate a politically advantageous ethnic identity. Paul Brass reiterates that “the process by which elites mobilise ethnic identities simplifies those beliefs and values, distorts them, and select those which are politically useful rather than central to the belief system of the group concerned”. Among the Morans also, the ethnic elites of the group went on to reassert their distinct cultural values and beliefs. That assertion was instrumental in redefining the ethnic identity of Morans. The birth of AMS was followed by the mobilization of Moran students working under the banner of AAMYCS. Under the auspicious of AMS, and chairmanship of Bholanath Moran, a student body of the group was formed on May 5, 1968 namely Moran Chatra Sabha (Association of Moran Students). This association of the Moran students would later become All Assam Moran Student’s Union (AAMSU), and finally All Moran Students’ Union (AMSU) in the late 1980s. Its parent organization is AAMYCS which was formed in 1940. Thus, with the formation of Moran Chatra Sanmilan, the process of separation between the two communities at organizational level was completed. Thereafter AAMYCS decided to work exclusively for the Mataks following the activities AAMS.
Pradip Kumar Moran, the erstwhile founding president of the Talap-Kardoiguri branch of AMSU (1993), argues that after Independence, almost for two decades there was hardly any person among the Morans who could show the community a path towards development. Moran reiterates that initially a few members of the Moran community joined hands with the leaders of AAMS, “which is a ‘Jatiya Sangathan’ (community based) organization of Mataks, a ‘medley’ community containing the followers of the Matak Religious Sect”, but with the passage of time, “in the face of Moran’s distinct identity and existence, the influence of ‘Matak’ identity and beliefs began to decline among the Morans”.

Some farsighted persons among the Morans who could feel the nerve of the community, decided in the early 1960s to address the issues and grievances of the Morans separately from the Mataks, which culminated in the birth of AMS and AMSU. Pradip Kumar Moran’s arguments which maintain that ‘Matak’ is a ‘religious sect’, sharply contradict the claims of AAMS and AAMYC, as these two mouth-piece organizations of Mataks have been continuously asserting since long ago (1941) that “Matak is an ‘aboriginal tribe’, and not a ‘religious sect’ as defined by a section of people”.

Thus, the formation of AMS and AMSU placed the joint ethnic journey of the Mataks and the Morans at a juncture, as the ethnic elites from the latter began to perceive their community as less privileged as compared to the former. In such junctures, often the process of identifying the differences between the relatively advantageous group and the disadvantageous group begins. Excluding the former the members of the latter go on to claim that they are culturally distinct, and that they alone are the ‘sons of the soil’ and represent the indigenous culture. If the relatively backward ethnic group is a minority concentrated in a geographical area, they call for certain sorts of decentralization of political power or politico-administrative devolution or in some cases for secession.

‘Elite competition’ was one of major causes behind the defection of Morans from AAMS and AAMYCS.

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Over recent decades several ethnic communities in Northeast India have tended to invoke their tribal roots by glorifying their traditional culture, beliefs and way of life, and rendering wider publicity to them via social media. Culture, down through the ages, has remained an instrument to unite people as a means of pursuing a shared destiny and attaining political privileges. Ethnic assertions, in essence, are not essentially inclined towards seeking rejuvenation of a glorious past, nor are they necessarily secessionist in their objectives. They are the outcomes of antagonism which is constructed politically. Most of them are primarily aimed at accommodating their respective collective identities with the given structure and policies of the Indian state. It is the reason why in several cases, ethnic boundaries among certain groups have appeared to be flexible and dynamic. The ethnic groups may construct and reconstruct their identity as per the changing socio-political circumstances.

The growing feeling of relative political deprivation among the Morans being a part of the composite ethnic group was one of the major factors which persuaded the Moran leaders to distinguish their ethno-political identity from the rest. In the three consecutive Vidhan Sabha elections between 1952 and 1962, although some
candidates from the Matak community were elected to ALA, none of them belonged to the Moran section of the Mataks. It was an issue of frustration for the Moran leaders because although they had been working under the banners of AAMS and AAMYCS. Ethnic conflict, according to the Primordialists, stems from the difference between the competing groups in terms of ‘natural ties’ that are derived from historic, racial, religious or regional connections. These perceived natural ties are, however, interpreted and manipulated by the ethnic elites, who are aimed at reformulating the political identity of their respective groups to suit the requirements of the evolving socio-political circumstances. It is the juncture when the Primordialist, the Instrumentalist and the Constructivist approaches meet one another in light of modernity. The historic territorial isolation of the Morans from the rest of the Mataks and some specific socio-economic grievances prevailing in the Moran society were some of the other reasons that prompted the leaders of the former to form a separate mouth-piece organization for the group namely AMS (1965). It was followed by the formation of a students’ body among the group named AMSU (1968). Thereafter SMMS and AAMS made an effort to reunite the two groups within a single ‘Matak’ identity. However, due to the rigid attitude of the leaders of AMS, those efforts bore no fruit. According to the demand of AMS, in 1972, the Morans were enlisted separately from the Mataks in list of MOBC. This event was the signifier of a formal bifurcation between the two groups in government parlance. In some official documents of the Assam Government, still the nomenclatures ‘Matak’ and ‘Moran’ can find their places together which bears the evidence of the erstwhile joint ethnic mobilization of the two groups. The most important factor, however, which finally prompted the Moran leaders to leave AAMS and AAMYCS, was the medley composition of the Matak community which apart from some Mongoloid sub-groups, includes some Varna-Hindus people of Upper Assam. These people have retained some of their original cultural practices including caste hierarchy. They hardly possess the general criteria fixed by the Central Government to get recognition as ST. Most of the Moran leaders, under such circumstances, began to realize that if they introduced themselves with the other sub-groups of the Matak community which includes some non-tribal also, their demand to get recognition as a ST from the Central Government would be weakened. The historic socio-cultural division between the Mataks and the Morans in terms of their loyalty towards two different branches of Mayamara Satras has been persisting down through the centuries till this new millennium. The Morans who have become the disciples of the Namonir Mayamara Satra, introduce themselves as ‘Matak’ and like the rest of the ethnic Mataks, their ethnic identity falls under the banner of AAMS and AAMYCS, whereas the ethnic Morans of the present day Tinsukia district have been traditionally showing their allegiance to the Ujonir Mayamara Satra since the days of Moamaria Rebellion. It is worth-mentioning that although the ethnic Morans has politically ceased to a part of the ethnic Mataks, in the socio-cultural sphere the former still introduce themselves as ‘Matak’. This ‘dual identity’ of the Morans was based on their ethno-centric assertion that “All Morans are Matak, but all Mataks are not Moran”. This claim of the ethnic Morans has staged the exact antithesis of the assertion of the ethnic Mataks who are claiming to be one of the aboriginal tribes of Assam. The academic efforts of AAMS to appropriate the ethnographic history of the group is still obsessed with the objective to substantiate that the ‘Matak’ is a ‘tribe’, and not a ‘religious community’ as portrayed by the dominant discourse of history. The recent quest of the mouth-piece organizations among the
group for tracing back Mataks’ ethnic origin to the South-East Asia is not without political significance, as it is aimed at establishing conformity of the group with the Tai-speaking people of Assam. AAMS and some intellectuals today introduce the group as the ‘Ancient Tai’ people of Assam, who had migrated to the region even before the Tai-Ahoms. These assertions reflect the aspiration of the group for ‘political tribalization’ similar to that of the several other non-tribal ethnic groups of Assam. The Matak leaders currently claim that “All Mataks are Mayamarias, but all Mayamarias are not Matak”, which signifies the transformation of a section of the Mataks from being a part of an ‘open and composite religious collectivity’ to a relatively ‘closed ethnic society’. In their quest for ‘tribal’ identity, AAMS and AAMYCS have excluded several sub-groups among the Mataks. As for instance, the Matak-kaivartas like the ethnic Morans still follow the Mayamara Vaishnavism, and thereby introduce themselves as ‘Matak’ by religion, and not by ‘ethnicity’. It is worth mentioning that although the ethnic Moran leaders have asserted that there is no ‘natural tie’ between the Mataks and the Morans except for certain socio-religious connections, AAMS still maintains that the Morans are nothing but a ‘clan’ of the Mataks as opposed to the assertion of the former. These assertions and reassertions have been the ‘construct’ of evolving politico-economic and socio-cultural scenario of the state down through the various junctures of history. Under various circumstances, ethnic elites have always been playing a pioneering role in articulating specific political interest of their respective groups.

VI. CONCLUSION

It has been found in the study that within the ethnic Mataks, some members of the various sub-groups politically and officially introduce themselves as ‘Matak’, but simultaneously they are retaining some of their distinct cultural symbols and traits in the private socio-religious sphere. The mouth-piece bodies and the ethnic elites of the group are purposively creating a single ethno-political identity of its members excluding their private spheres of identity. The activities of these organizations involve an ethnic politics of selective manipulation and non-disclosure. It is yet to be explored how such demeanors of most of the members of the group have been shaped by the complicated birth story of a modern ethnic identity out of a composite politico-religious collectivity.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 “Swargadeo” was the ‘Hindu’ Royal title of the Ahom Monarchs (Swarga – heaven + Deo – a divine person).

2 The undivided Lakhimpur district initially included several areas of the present day Arunachal Pradesh, and was known as Lakhimpur Frontier Tract. It also contained the present day Districts of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and Dhemaji. The undivided Dibrugarh district was carved out from Lakhimpur in 1976. It was followed by the formation of Dhemaji and Tinsukia districts in 1989.

3 The Matak Rajya (Matak territory) was divided into two tracts namely Ujoni Matak (Upper Matak) and Namoni Matak (Lower Matak). The first tract was situated between the Dangori and the Dibruri rivers. It was predominantly inhabited by the Moran section of the Mataks. On the other hand, the Namoni Matak region signifies the territory situated between the Burhi Dihing and the Brahmaputra rivers. It was predominantly inhabited by the rest of the Mataks excluding the Morans. Even today the territorial demographic distribution of the Mataks and the Morans remain more or less similar to that of the early 19th Century.

4 The Jhum (Shifting) cultivation is a primitive method of cultivation seen among the tribal people of Northeastern region, mainly hill tracts. The practice involves clearing forest cover or vegetation on land, drying and burning it before the onset of monsoon and cropping on it thereafter. After harvest, the land is left fallow till it becomes reusable for same purpose in a cycle. The Ahu (an early variety of seasonal rice) cultivation which was popular among the Morans till the 1970’s involves similar practices on land. Moreover, ‘land’ was perceived as a ‘community resource’ by the Morans in the early colonial days. The colonial masters, therefore, found an opportunity to legally recognize those fellow land areas as ‘Waste Lands’, which became a pretext to grab traditional cultivable land of Morans. Moreover, it decreased the expenditure of tea planters to some extent because they could extend the area of plantation into those fellow lands which had already been cleared of jungles by the Morans.


6 Bhagirath Maju Gohain, the last Matak Chief was appointed as a Sadar Amin (judicial officer) at Dibrugarh (1842-47), when the town was announced as the Head Quarter of Lakhimpur district after the annexation of Matak territory.


8 Munindra Das, Janajatikaranar Dabi aru Janagosthiya Andolan (Demand of Scheduled Tribes Status and Ethnic Movement) (Guwahati: Assam Book Trust, 2015), 9.


14 Ibid.


16 Upen Rabha Hakacham, “Moran-Matak aru Moamaria Samaj” (Moran-Matak and Moamaria Society), in Gandhoi (An Annual Mouth-piece of the All Moran Students’ Union (Golden Jubilee Special Edition), ed. Girin Moran (Tinsukia: All Moran Students’ Union, 2018), 78.

17 Ibid., 259


21 The researcher witnessed a curious evidence of this during his Interviewing of Hukhidhar Dohutia, one of the renowned activists among the Moran community, in December, 2018.


25 Ibid., 196


28 Pradip Kumar Moran, “Behangam Dristre Moranhakalar Oitihasik Dehkot kesu Centa” (Some thoughts on the organizational dimensions of Morans from a bird’s -eye view), in *Soumar Bhumiputra* (Son of the soil of *Soumar*) (A Biennial Magazine with special reference to the vsources of the problem of present ‘Moran’ community including the socio-economic, Political & Cultural history), ed. Sailen Neog (All Moran Students’ Union: 2018), 74.
