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### The Transmutation of Ethnic Politics of the Matak of Assam: Pre Colonial and Colonial Scenario

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#### ABSTRACT

“Ethnic politics is a normal phenomenon in the day to day politics of developing countries like India, which is a home to various ethnic groups. Ethnic politics in simple words refers to the politics related to ethnicity and ethnic groups. It is a situation in which people are mobilized on the basis of their ethnic identity whereby people tend to extend their support towards the leaders and elites of their respective ethnic groups with a view to maintain their distinct ethnic identity as well as to obtain certain privileges and benefits in the society, from the government. The Matak are one of the aboriginal ethnic tribal groups of people of Assam that are subjected to numerous discriminations and deprivations and are on the verge of becoming identity less in contemporary period. As such an attempt has been made in this paper to discuss about their ethnic politics and its transition in the pre-colonial and colonial period in Assam with a view to revive their lost glorious history which got diluted with the passage of time.

#### 1. Introduction

Ethnicity and Politics are closely related to one another. In contemporary times the issue of ethnic politics has been gaining ground in different parts of the world. Infact, it a common feature of a multi-ethnic society. Ethnic Politics in simple sense is the politics that is based on surrounding ethnic groups who inorder to uplift their position and for their all round development uses various tactics of negotiations, demands, protests inorder to serve their interest from the ruling regime. It implies the politics of conflict and collaboration among ethnic groups within a political system (Chaube, 1975). Sometimes, the internal

structure of the state and the government is also significant in the growth of ethnic politics. The domestic political environment of the states also characterizes the development of ethnic politics (Hashmi & Majeed, 2015). In addition to that the propensity of the state along with the portrayal of the dominant groups to mark all the desires and demands of the ethnic communities as anti- national without properly analyzing the whole issue further boosted the potency of ethnic conflicts and ethno-politics in the state (Singha, 2016). Ethnic politics is a mechanism of the socio-politically and economically weaker section to challenge the prevailing status-quo.

In a diverse nation comprising of numerous ethnic groups, ethnic politics is a key phenomenon in the regular politics. Ethnic Politics in India has been a pre-independence phenomenon. India being a heterogeneous society with diverse ethnic groups and identities, ethnic politics is quite evident. It is witnessed through numerous movements, agitations and demands for socio-economic advantages and developments as well as for material benefits and political power; initiated by various ethnic groups. After independence, the homogenization of Indian national identity has marked the initiation of ethnic politics in a very rigid manner.

Ethnic politics is a broad concept which includes the subjects of ethnic identity assertion, competition of ethnic elites and groups for advantages and developments. It gets further impetus when an ethnic group competes with other ethnic groups for valued resources and opportunities in societies undergoing social mobilization, industrialization and bureaucratization. Northeastern region is a mosaic of different ethnic groups whereby search for ethnic identities by diverse ethnic groups has been a living phenomenon in the politics of the region and similar is the case with the state of Assam. In recent decades Assam has become an ethnic cauldron with diversified demands for recognition and representation. Preservation of ethnic identities is the basis of ethno-politics in the contemporary period. It can be defined as a phenomenon which rose due to shared experiences of injustice and marginalization of certain sections of the society. It occurs when some ethnic groups or social minorities find themselves as oppressed, marginalized and feel that their uniqueness and distinctiveness are under threat from the majority group. In such situations, there is collective mobilization within the group with a view to secure their distinct identity (Brunt, 1989) and the case of Matak tribal group falls in line with the above situations. This paper will basically deal with their ethnic politics during Pre-Colonial and Colonial era in Assam highlighting the transition in their ethnic politics during those periods.

## **2. METHODS**

The method used in preparing this paper is descriptive and historical-analytical in nature. Both primary and secondary sources of data are used. Secondary sources like books, journal articles, PhD and M.Phil thesis as well as the resources available on internet has been used judiciously alongwith primary sources such as ministries reports, memorandums, government reports etc.

### 3. RESULTS

Matak is a distinct tribal group with its own glorious history. They fought for justice, freedom and human equality and finally succeeded in carving out an autonomous kingdom for themselves (Dutta, 1985). Their fight to attain these objectives has been a very difficult one and they had to bear all oppressions and humiliations heaped upon them by the then existing government (Dutta, 1985). With the passage of time and due to time's whirlpool they began to lose their glorious tribal history and knowingly or unknowingly were included as a group of people within the General Hindu Caste. The tribal group of people that was once very powerful and maintained their independent rule, who directly or indirectly helped the *Ahoms* to lay the foundation of their 600 years long rule in Assam gradually lost their land, independence and even their identity during the *Ahom* and British rule in Assam.

The tribal group who had the capacity to change the history of Assam later had to become dependent on the alien governments for their survival. Some of the reasons which added fuel to the plights of the *Matakas* can be sum up as- Firstly, as the *Matakas* failed to provide requisite documents before the Simon Commission in regard to proving their tribal identity, they remained outside the scope of constitutional safeguards and privileges provided to the tribal groups of people in India. Secondly, as their lands were snatched away from them illegally and as the resources of their land were exploited, looted and plundered by the foreigners they became economically and socially very weak and backward. Thirdly, all those baseless allegations which undermined their original identity as a tribal group are also responsible for the plights of the *Matakas*. Fourthly, another cause of their backwardness is their addiction to opium in a large scale.

### 4. DISCUSSION

#### **The Matakas of Assam: A Brief Understanding**

The *Matakas* are a tribal group of people of Assam, belonging to Tai Mongoloid origin that lived independently in a territory of their own known as '*Saumar*' region of Upper Assam before the advent of *Sukapha* and his team in the early part of 13<sup>th</sup> century into Assam (Boruah & Gogoi, 2017). As the writing of *Buranjis* (historiography) started in Assam only after the invasion of *Ahoms* so information and data regarding the aboriginal tribes residing in this part of the region is limited and similar is the case with the *Matakas*. However, history validates the fact that the first group of people whom *Sukapha* encountered in Assam was the *Matakas* living in Tipam. In this regard a portion of *Ahom Buranji* is reproduced which was written in Tai language and was translated directly into English from Tai by Raishahab Golap Chandra Barua and published in the year 1930. That portion of the *Buranji* states that "The king *Sukapha* brought with him a *Matak* family from Tipam. This family formerly used to supply brinjals to the king. With the headman of the *Matak* family, the king's soldiers advanced on conquering the *Nagas*. The *Matakas* were liked very

much” (Borua,Ahom Buranji). The purpose of reproducing this portion of the *Buranji* is that as it is the first and only *Buranji* translated straight from the Tai language into English it can be regarded as more authentic and reliable as well as more convincing than other *Buranjis* of that time.

The *Mataks* are the ‘Sons of Soil’ of Assam. Majority of them are agrarian based and considers agriculture as their main occupation. They do so by sticking to traditional agricultural methods and are far away from the influence of science and technology. Socio-economically the *Mataks* are very backward and their literacy rate is also very low. In the political sphere also, except for one or two persons no one has been able to hold positions till today. So far as their religion is concerned they collectively embraced Vaishnavism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century i.e. many centuries after the advent of the *Ahoms* into Assam. Although they adopted Vaishnavism but they still follow their traditional tribal belief systems like approval of slaughter of animals and birds for the feasts of various religious functions (*Hokams*) etc.

Often there are allegations that Matak is not a tribal group but rather a religious group. Even there are allegations that all the people following *Mayamora* Vaishnavism are Matakas and the words *Mayamora* and *Moamoria* are used quite synonymously with the word *Matak*. Further, there is also a notion that the word *Matak* is derived from the word *Mot-Ek* or *Motek*. But in reality all these allegations are not true. Various eminent scholars, historians, writers, philosophers through their opinions along with historical data and facts affirmed that *Matak* is a tribe who possessed their distinctive ethnic identity and traits and that the history of the *Mataks* is much older than the history of *Mayamora* Vaishnavism because in Assam people started embracing Vaishnavism only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Ethnic Politics of the Matakas during Pre-Colonial Period**

The history of Matakas is that of a struggling history. Starting from how they lived independently in the Saumar region to the Ahom invasion whereby they became friends and maintained a cordial relation with them to how their independence got alienated gradually from them and were brought under the Ahom rule followed by the historic Moamoriya rebellion against the Ahom aristocracy where they played the lead roles, incorrect listing of their tribal group in the census which made them lose their tribal status till the struggles in the contemporary period, this tribal group has made numerous endeavours to maintain their own identity and independence amidst all its struggles.

Initially the relation between the *Ahoms* and the *Mataks* were very cordial. Infact, the *Mataks* were the first group of people whom *Sukapha* and his team met when they came to Assam. This has been mentioned several times in the pages of history. A point here needs to be highlighted that when *Swargadeo Sukapha* and his group came to Assam no woman came along with them and as such they later got married to the local women of this land and by dint of matrimonial alliances they were able to strengthen their friendship and

maintain good relationship with the indigenous people of the region. With the passage of time *Sukapha* gradually became the ruler of almost all the petty kingdoms of this region. Finally by establishing his capital at *Charaideo*, he formally initiated the era of *Ahom* governance in Assam. Parallely, the *Mataks* got alienated from their independent rule in '*Saumar*' and came under the *Ahom* rule either by diplomatic tactics of *Sukapha* or by their own will. Nevertheless, the *Mataks* played a very crucial and vital role in *Ahom* administration. During the reign of *Swargadeo Rudrasingha*, the *Mataks* were able to acquire some of the notable positions in the *Ahom* Kingdom like that of *Buragohain*, *Borpatragogain*, *Borphukan*, *Borbaruah* etc (Chetia, 2017). Besides these noteworthy positions they also render their services in the form of manual labourers in various construction and developmental works.

With the passing time following the policy of Friendship, *Sukapha* brought political unity and cultural assimilation and slowly the ruling regime turned out to play the role of a hegemon over the autonomous tribes and its people of this land. The *Mataks* too suffered a lot and had to face threats pertaining to their identity and survival under the *Ahom* rule and as such in order to overthrow their hegemonic power a famous rebellion was initiated against the *Ahoms* under the leadership of *Mataks* and *Morans* which is known as the historic Moamoriya Rebellion. Towards the end of the rebellion and as an outcome of it, the *Matak* Kingdom was established by *Swargadeo Sarbananda Singha* in *Bengmara* (present Tinsukia). Even today when one speaks of 'Ancient *Matak* Kingdom' one refers to the *Bengmara* Kingdom of *Swargadeo Sarbananda Singha*. It was one of the most renowned kingdoms of the eastern part of India with its capital at *Bengmora*.

*Swargadeo Sarbananda Singha* was the first ruler of the *Matak* State. As a king *Sarbananda Singha* was never a power hungry and despotic ruler. He was a man who loved freedom and his determination and spirit was very adorable. He was a ruler having strong faith in democratic values. This is evident from the fact that he treated his subjects equally without any discrimination. History throws light on the fact that in the *Matak* State not much tax were collected from the people and in most of the times they were exempted from paying taxes by the rulers and as such the subjects were very much satisfied by the King's rule. He was also very much committed towards the welfare of his masses and as such for the convenience of the masses and in administration he initiated numerous socio-economic developmental works like he constructed numerous forts, roads, houses and dugged ponds and tanks and did all those things in every possible way which would help in beautifying the kingdom. Some of the significant ponds and tanks (*Pukhuri*) which were dugged during his reign were *Tinikunia Pukhuri*, *Na-Pukhuri*, *Bengmora Pukhuri*, *Devi Pukhuri* etc. Presently, the *Na-Pukhuri* (tank) is renovated and a beautiful park is built around the tank and the park is named after the father of King *Sarbananda Singha*, *Marut Nandan Kanan*. In a similar way various roads (*Ali*) were also constructed for better transportation and communication during his reign and some of them are still in use today like *Gudha Nath Baruah Ali*,

*Rajgarh Ali, Bor Ali, Rongagora Ali, Joypur Ali, Hatiali* etc. Besides these, some of the names of places which were given during the *Matak* rule are still in use in contemporary era like *Panitola, Rongpuria, Romai, Chaulkhuwa, Kakopothar, Rupai, Doomdooa* etc (Neog, 2017). Furthermore, the *Matak* State was very famous for rice cultivation and was known as ‘Assam’s storehouse of granary’ (Dutta, 2017). The place called *Chabua* where the first tea cultivation was initiated fell under the then *Matak* state.

During the reign of the *Matak* King *Sarbananda Singha*, there was a very cordial relationship between the *Mataks* and *Singphos* and also between the *Khamtis* and the *Mataks*. As the *Mataks* had a good friendly relationship with the *Singphos* so directly or indirectly they were able to grow a cordial relationship with the ruler and the masses of the neighbouring country Burma. Due to this advantage when the Burmese attacked Assam not much destruction and harm was caused to the *Matak* Kingdom. Moreover, *Sarbananda Singha* also maintained good relations with the *Nagas*. However, the self governance of the *Matak* rulers in their State was very short lived and momentary. After the recognition of the *Matak* State by the *Ahom* government in 1805, it could rule only for a few years as in 1842 the British government annexed the *Matak* kingdom like the other parts of India in general and Assam in particular. However, it is to be noted here that witnessing *Mataks* heroic zeal and capabilities as a powerful administering unit in Upper Assam, *Matak* Kingdom was the last among all the kingdoms to be annexed by the Britishers in 1841 under the policy of divide and Rule.

### **Ethnic Politics of the Matak during Colonial Period**

Shortly after the annexation of the *Matak* Kingdom by the Britishers, the capital of the *Matak* Kingdom *Bengmora* witnessed tremendous inflow of foreigners who were brought by the Britishers to fulfill their various endeavours. The migrants helped the Britishers in their various administrative works, worked as manual workers in the tea gardens opened by the Britishers in the fertile lands which once comprised the *Matak* territory, worked as construction labourers in different construction initiatives undertaken by the Britishers etc. Slowly, the then glorious capital of the *Mataks* became the hub of trade and commerce of the Britishers and even the capital transformed into a commercial town of the British government. This alienated the indigenous people from their own land.

With the passage of time, the very name *Bengmora* got changed and the place began to be known as Tinsukia- a name which is still in use today (Chetia & Rajkhowa, 2017). In order to loot and plunder the natural resources of the eastern part of Assam, the formation of commercial towns have become inevitable and as such the Tinsukia town became very famous as the commercial centre of the Britishers. In 1902-05 the British government through periodical lease of land, transferred the land of this region to a businessman from Rajasthan (Chetia & Rajkhowa, 2017). It was seen that the British government extended their full support and help in every possible manner to

the businessmen of Rajasthan in order to draw out and gather the valuable resources of Assam for their own profit. In this way the lands of the *Mataks* slowly went to the hands of the foreigners sometimes due to the purpose of trade and commerce and sometimes for the purpose of tea cultivation. Although for the protection and preservation of the historical symbols and the territories of the *Matak* state the residents of the *Matak* state raised their demands before the Britishers but all such pleas and efforts of the villagers for the protection of their land turned out to be futile and finally being unable to find any solution they began to reside in the surrounding areas of the tea gardens established by the Britishers.

The *Mataks* who were once able to shake the entire 600 years of *Ahom* rule in Assam gradually became aliens and foreigners in their own land under the British rule. Economically they became very weak as their lands were snatched away from them for tea cultivation. As they were agrarian based communities they found it very difficult to find an alternative source of livelihood. Not only economically but in all the spheres of life they became very weak and backward. As a consequence of Moamoriya Revolution hundreds of years of *Ahom* Rule became weak. Kings quite frequently changed and their rule became more tough and complex and as such it became very difficult for the masses to sustain in the kingdom under such hard rule. However, for all the wrong doings and happenings the blame went upon the *Mataks*. In some of the one sided *Buranjis* the *Mataks* were even portrayed as rebellions. With the passage of time this notion became far more rapid and strong and the *Mataks* were seen through the lens of derogation and discrimination. If one would give their identity as *Mataks* they were not given any jobs or any privileges under the British rule and as such the *Matak* people began to give their identity as *Ahoms*. Recollecting the harsh days of British occupying the *Matak* state through the policy of discrimination the *Mataks* disliked them.

Under the Colonial Rule, due to antagonism of the *Mataks* towards the Britishers the foreign government did not provide any prominent portfolio to them in their administration and bureaucracy and even deprived them of their adequate economic, political and social rights and benefits (Chetia, 2017). In the areas dominated by the *Mataks*, trade and commerce began to be dominated by the non-*Matak* people. As such they gradually began to lose their identity and land and began to suffer from inferiority complex (Baruah, 2017). Moreover, the practice of opium taking by the *Mataks* was indeed a diplomatic endeavor of the Britishers to snatch away their land and enthusiasm from them. As a result of all these slowly the *Matak* tribal group began to lose their glorious history and became an alien in their own land. This tribal group which was once able to change the history of Assam had to depend upon alien governments for their survival and protection of their identity. Infact they became a minority in their native place and suffered untold miseries under both the *Ahom* and British rule in Assam.

1929-1947 was a period of critical and momentous juncture for the tribal groups of Assam. An attempt has been made to find out the tribal groups of Assam and in this respect the Simon commission was entrusted with the responsibility of finding out the tribal groups with proper evidences and documents and those who were regarded as Tribal groups of Assam by the Simon Commission would be granted the ST Status (Borah & Gharphalia, 2019). But during that time educated people among the *Mataks* were almost negligible and as such they failed to provide evidences of their tribal identity before the Simon Commission and remained aloof from inclusion in the ST list. Furthermore, although there is no doubt that *Matak* is a distinct tribal group of people possessing their own history, culture and traditions but from time to time a debate often arises questioning their ethnicity and allegations are raised that *Matak* is only a religious sect. These allegations stood as a hindrance in the path of acquiring ST status by the *Mataks* (Gogoi, 2013). Moreover, to recover the lost glory of the *Matak* tribe which they had lost during the *Ahom* Rule some conscious and far-sighted *Matak* people in order to determine the definition of *Matak* tribal group urged their people through leaflets that during the census of 1941, to give their identity as *Matak* Tribe in the Survey Papers. When the *Mataks* wanted to record their tribal identity in place of caste Hindu so as to avail proportional political seat adjustment in the interest of the overall tribal population, the public exposure relating to the origin of the word '*Motek*' was intensified to deny the *Mataks* from their rights to avail their tribal status (Gogoi, 2013). As such the outcome was that the census was not fruitful as thought of. Moreover, those who conducted the census included the *Mataks* within the larger general Hindu community thereby depriving the *Mataks* of their distinctive tribal identity and as such the *Mataks* till today has failed to recover its lost historical identity. By losing their original tribal identity, they even lost their legitimate political benefits extended to the Scheduled Tribe communities in Assam. Further, during the decade prior to independence almost all the indigenous tribal groups of Assam stated forming their own voluntary organizations to preserve and protect their identity and similar was the case with the *Mataks*. The *Mataks* has been trying their level best to uplift their socio-economic and political status which got diluted with the passage of time. One of the most notable initiatives in this regard is the formation of their voluntary organization i.e. *All Assam Matak Sanmilan* in 1939 under whose banner they have been carrying out their demands and democratic agitation from the colonial period till the present era.

In short, it was due to the existence of the glorious history of the *Matak* tribal group of Assam that *Swargadeo Sarbananda Singha* was able to establish the *Matak* Kingdom at *Bengmara*. Even the *Ahom* rulers gave recognition to the *Bengmara Matak* Kingdom. In 1826, during the Yandaboo Treaty, when the entire administration of Assam was handed over to the Britishers even then the Britishers did not annexed the *Matak* Kingdom and gave it the recognition of a Princely State (Gogoi, 2010). As per the records from the *Buranjis*, a British official named Mr. White advised the British Administration not to exercise its power upon the *Matak* Kingdom until the



death of the *Matak* ruler Matibar Bar Senapoti. Even the Britishers accepted the advice of Mr. White (Gogoi, 2010). As per the records of the history *Matak* kingdom was the last kingdom to be annexed by the Britishers in Assam but after its annexation the *Mataks* faced untold miseries under their rule.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In short, the *Mataks* had an independent sovereign kingdom of their own in the eastern most part of Assam and the present districts of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia primarily comprised the *Matak* kingdom with its capital at *Bengmara* (present Tinsukia town) which was later annexed by the Britishers in 1842 A.D. by granting a political pension to the *Matak* Royal family. Known facts of history validate that the *Mataks* came to Assam long before the *Ahom* invasion but however in course of time and in the turbulence of historical events during the later medieval period, the *Mataks* who by tradition maintained their tribal cultures and dialect had to bear the brunt of misfortune due to incorrect listing of their tribal identity and as a result they lost their legitimate political benefits and other socio-economic privileges extended to the Scheduled tribe communities in India (Gogoi, 2013). They are now included in the list of More Other Backward Classes (MOBC) by the Government.

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