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The Moran Tribe of Tinsukia District of Assam: A Study of Their Ethno – History

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Abstract:

The Moran community is one of the aboriginal tribes of Assam. In the 13th century they lived in the south eastern corner of the Brahmaputra valley. The Morans have a long history in the north –eastern part of India. They had their own independent kingdom before the advent of the Ahoms. The origin of the word Moran is still remaining obscure. According to the British reports the Morans are a distinct tribe inhabiting the jungle, which is, a division of upper Assam. It is possible that it is a tribal word that means a group of people like, Mising, Mulung, Mung tai, etc. In the early 17th century, Aniruddhadeva converted them to vaishnavism and thus brought about a regeneration of their society and culture. Despite long process of assimilation with other communities and transformation of their culture, they have been retaining many aspects of their old culture-ethnic art, music, dance, language and above all, social and economic systems. They have given their culture a tribal character.

Keywords: Moran Community, North- eastern part of India, Vaishnavism, Ethnic.

1. Introduction

The Moran community is one of the well known ethnic communities of Assam. The eastern most part of the Brahmaputra valley around the Dihing Dikhou Rivers has been the inhabited area of the Moran's since ancient times. This region includes mainly the present Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sibsagar districts of Assam. They are now found predominantly concentrated in the Tinsukia district of Assam having about four lakhs population. From what has been recorded in the Assamese chronicles, it appears that they had a primitive culture and economy at the time of the Sukapha's arrival in the Brahmaputra valley.ⁱ They were living a tribal way of life organised under their chief.ⁱⁱ It is stated that in the early 13th century their population was not more than for thousand.ⁱⁱⁱ

The origin of the word Moran is still remaining obscure. Benudhar Sarmah gives a geographical explanation in his presidential speech of 'All Assam Matak Sanmilan' held in 1968. He opines that the upper Brahmaputra area was known as Ladhai in distant past. He says that long before the advent of Sukapha, there came a man of the 'Meram' clan of Dharmapala's kingdom and became the ruler of Ladhai. He supposes that the name 'Moran' is probably derived from the name of that Meram clan.^{iv} The word Matak is sometimes associated with the word Moran. Some scholars believe that the word 'Matak' is a Tai word. 'Ma' means powerful and 'tak' means tested.^v It means that the Mataks were considered by the Ahoms as tested and brave people.

Rajmohan Nath opines that the term 'Matak' means the head or upper part of a country, inhabited by the Morea sect of the Austric people, who, after an admixture with the local people living there come to be known as Morans.^{vi}

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According to Endle, the Morans originated from Mengkong (Maingkhwong) in the Hukong valley, at the upper reaches of the chindwin river.^{viii} He narrated that a few centuries ago, three brothers named Moylang Moran and Moyran inhabited there. Among them the second one called Moran crossed the Patkai and entered Assam and settled near the Tipuk river.^{ix} In course of time from the name the followers came here to be known as Morans. They were also called Habungiyas or the sons of the soil.^x

Some scholars believe that Morans are of Austric origin.^{xi} In course of time they assimilated with the Mongoloid Bodos of the region. Some others, however believe that they (the Morans) belong to the Bodo group, as they have racial and linguistic affinities with the Bodos.^{xii} For example, Sir Edward Gait in his. 'Report on the census of India (Assam) 1891, has mentioned that the Morans had a language of their own, which was similar to that of the Kacharis, although they gradually abandoned it in favour of Assamese.^{xiii} Further, in the History of Assam he emphatically states that the Moran language was undoubtedly Bodo.^{xiv}

According to their own records the Morans are one of the twelve aboriginal tribal clans of the region. They were called Kirat Kachari^{xv}. In the early 17th century Aniruddhadeva a socio-religious reformer of outstanding personality converted the untouchable and the backward communities to Mayamora Vaishnavism and thus brought about a regeneration of their society and culture. This

religious belief developed and preached by Aniruddhadeva came to be known as Mayamora religion^{xvi} In course of time, the Morans were converted to this religious sect.

The Morans are mainly known in the history of Assam as the author of first popular rebellion against the Ahom government which took place in 1769. This movement challenged the despotism of the Ahom monarch based on divine right and deposed the reigning king Laksmi Singh, The Moran, under the leadership of Raghav Moran and Nahar Khara Saikia, occupied the throne and made Romakanta, their king. However Romakanta's regime was short-lived. The Ahom king soon regained his position and suppressed the rebellion. But being unable to subdue the Morans completely they granted outonomy to the principality of Bengmora (Present Tinsukia Town) as 'Matak Rajya' and concurred the title 'Barsenapati' (the great general) to their king Sarbananda Singha. This political arrangement was however shattered in the year 1842 A.D., for it was in that year that the whole upper Assam area including the Matak Rajya was annexed to British territory.

2. Religious Belief

The Morans of the present times are the followers of 'Mahapurushia Vaisnava' religion introduced by Aniruddhadeva a disciple of Sri Shankardeva who was the founder of the said religion^{xvii}. Prior to their conversion into Vaisnava religion, there is no any writing as to of what religion they were devotees. But some traces of their culture of religion in some cases it can be imagined that they were pure 'Shaaktas' dedication even a human being before 'Kesai-Khati Thaan' of Sediya^{xviii}. They even today are found to perform 'Shaakta' ways of devotion to 'Kesai-Khaati of Sadiya on some certain occasions despite of their following Vaisnava rituals.

Despite, of the Moran followed 'Vaisnava religion, they perform some such religious functions which are totally antagonistic to Vaisnava principle. Perhaps such type of rituals are not to be found among other Vaisnava.

Like the other Assamese people the Morans do not celebrate the Bohag Bihu' from the last days of the year. Whereas in case of the other Assamese people Bihu is mainly a social festival, in case of the Moran it is a socio-religious festival.^{xix} They celebrate it for seven days from the first Wednesday of the month of Bohag. They celebrate the 1st day of Bohag Bihu as Goru-Bihu because they start it with the permission of the gosain and with his blessings the youths - male and female alike sing Bihu songs, dance and play other musical instruments. Usually the youths and girl gather under a tree and perform Bihu dance.

In the past, they had celebrated Rati Bihu' in the villages. But this practice is hardly seen today.

3. Food

The Morans are commonly non-vegetarian. Meat was their main food. They collected it by hunting wild live and fish. This stag of livelihood was succeeded by fruit collection and collectives cultivation. This method of cultivating collectively continued up to the opening of tea gardens by the Assam Tea Company in the 1830's when the maximum lands for cultivation were occupied by tea planters and migrated people from other places, they were bound to give up this most popular livelihood. They were also rich in orange plantation.

4. Shyness

Morans are shy by nature; hesitate to mix with others, who are unknown to them. It is possibly because of this nature that they use to inhabit isolated and interior places. It noted that once Tinsukia, known in early time as Bengmara was fully inhabited by them, but as son as it developed into a modern town with diverse groups of population, they began shifting to interior places. Local inhabitants now-testify to this fact. There are numerous beliefs and susperstitutions among the Moran society. Even now they would like to go top an astrologer rather than to a physician for treatment of disease. Or, they would worship gods and goddesses for the recovery of a partient.^{xx}

5. Language

It is stated that the Morans had their own dialect before they come into contact with Assamese language. But before they had come into contact with the Assamese speakers, they generally abandoned their dialect in favour of a mixed Assamese Moran from which is still when they speak among themselves^{xxi}

For illustration, few Moran words are cited below.

Moran	Assamese
Jijai	Grand mother
Baba/Aputi	Father
Abu dau	Father in low
Apitey	Always
Aedung	Boundary line
Phchika	Match Box
Aula	Veranda
Kapi	A kind if Candle
Etc.	

There are many such other words still used among morans, which merit exception and which are said to be of Bodo origin.^{xxii}

6. Distinctive Art and Culture

Morans have their distinctive culture and art forms. These distinctions are reflected in all aspects of their living. For example Moran community have their own fashion in dress. Generally Moran (gents) use to wear their 'dhuti' above the knees.^{xxiii} The old man cover their heads by a white turban. Women and girls wear a waist cloth, called mekhela which stretches above their breast, a waist band called 'Kakal mora' on waist and another cloth used to cover their whole body. Which is known as Parkoni. Their bride wears a special dress. It is made of bamboo sticks, feathers and tree leaves in complete tribal fashion.

In respect of ornaments the Moran women used to wear Janofphai Keru, Nezpata Thuria, Madali, Galapata, Dugdugi, Junbiri, Gam Kharu, Bala etc. These ornaments were made of gold and silver and were inlaid with stone.

From what has been discussed above, it can be stated that the Morans are an aboriginal tribe of upper Assam. The Matak is a synonym of the Morans. They had their own language in the past through now they have switched over to Assamese language. Their socio-religious functions are distinguished by certain features. They have given their culture a tribal character. They now demand to include them in the category of Scheduled Tribes (Plains)

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