

The Matakas and their Revolt against the State in 18th Century Assam Searching for Ethno-Religious Roots

D. Nath

Introduction

Among the various religious communities of Assam known since at least the middle ages, the Matakas are perhaps the best known for playing a historic role in the political process of the State. They are found scattered almost over the entire State of Assam, although they are concentrated in the upper Assam districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar and Jorhat. They organized a great revolt against the Ahom state of Assam in the year 1769, and continued it till the beginning of the 19th century, when they obtained an autonomous territory for themselves centering on the present Tinsukia town. There are local sources in the form of chronicles, and accounts left by the early British writers, where the history of the community and their revolt against the state have been recorded. Besides, there are oral and folk records in the form of public memories and sayings among the members of the community reflecting on their revolt, bearing enough psycho-historical evidence. The present paper is an attempt, on the basis of these materials, to look into the formation of the Matak community and the ethno-religious background of their revolt.

Formation of the Community

Known variously as Moamara, Moamariya, Mayamara, Mayamariya, Matak or Moran, the Matak, and that is the name used here to mean the community, stands for both a religious sect and a community consisting of its followers. Belonging to the Vaishnavism of Assam affiliation developed by **Sankaradeva** (1449-1568) in the 16th century, this religious sect was developed by **Aniruddhadeva** (1553-1627), a nephew of Sankaradeva, and a disciple of **Gopal Ata** (1476-1541), founder of the *Kala Sanghati* order of Assam Vaishnavism. To understand the emergence of this sect, and the sectarian community, a more detailed narration is necessary.

The religion, known as Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, developed by Sankaradeva, became divided into

four independent sectarian divisions called *Sanghati/Samhati* after the death of Sankaradeva. The process of the division began immediately following the nomination of **Madhavadeva**, by Sankaradeva, as the successor in his religious order. **Damodardeva**, a Brahman disciple of Sankaradeva, who did not like to see Madhavadeva as the head of the order, seceded from it establishing his own order, making inclusion of all Brahmanical practices (karma-kanda) which the founder of the sect had rejected as meaningless. Thus with Damodardeva, a Brahmanical section emerged undermining the original ideals of Sankaradeva's bhakti religion and allowing Brahmanical ideals to filter back into the religion.

This division was soon followed by another division created by the descendents of the saint himself. Known as the Purusha Sanghati, this division too rejected Madhavadeva's headship, and claimed Sankaradeva as the Guru, and did not give much stress on ritualism. The third division came when Gopaldeva alias Gopal Ata, a disciple of Madhavadeva, founded his sect with all forms of liberality in the practice of religion as allowed originally by Sankaradeva.

Known as the *Kala Sanghati*, Gopaldeva's sect was the most radical of the divisions where Brahmanical practices were totally discarded, and even 'a rosary was considered redundant'; and reverence to the Guru was given the supreme place. After thus the three Sanghatas were created, there remained the main stream directly under Madhavadeva. His disciple **Mathuradas Burha Ata**, therefore, in order to maintain the purity of the sect from further dilution, encompassed his own stream after the death of Madhavadeva, which soon came to be called Nika or Nitya Sanghati or the clean division, where ritualism played a minor role, but asceticism assumed prominence.

Kala-Sanghati and the Mayamara Sect – Searching for the Ideological Background

According to Maheswar Neog, "The liberalism of bhakti came to have its full social play in the Kala-sanghati fraternity, and the sect easily spread to the very grass-roots of society, acquired large followings everywhere and gained great social strength." The sect did not attach any importance to the Brahmanical ritualism, and even the Brahman followers of this sect discarded observing sandhya and gayatri and did not treat the sacred thread as necessary. This ideological base was given an established form by **Aniruddhadeva** in whose hands social equality and predominance of the preacher – the Guru – became its chief features, and the Guru was considered superior even to the God. It recognized

no barrier in community dining on the basis of caste differences, and there was no place for untouchability. This space for liberality and sense of equality and dignity attracted the mass of the people, particularly of the upper Brahmaputra valley, where the Mongoloid tribes had overwhelming predominance. Thus, Aniruddhadeva and his descendents easily accepted neophytes from among the Morans, Ahoms, Chutiyas, Kacharis, Kaivartas and other ethnic communities and lower classes into the fraternity. The biographical work of Aniruddhadeva and his descendents records that during this initial period, Aniruddhadeva also initiated into his sect one Dheli, a Muslim tailor, who was baptized as Dheli Bora, and registered among the Ahoms. Thus, Aniruddhadeva started with the 'lowlies' and the (so called) untouchables, going even against the ideals of his family and other influential sections of the society.

According to Neog, "The simplified and liberalized form of the bhakti religion presented no difficulty for these socially down-trodden peoples to adjust themselves to it, while their conversion gave them an unprecedented social uplift and a sense of bliss too." According to S. F. Hannay, "disciples seemed to flock into him (Aniruddhadeva) from all the different tribes, such as, Cassarees, Ahoms, Dhooms, Kuleetas, Kayasts, Harees, and others of the lowest classes. And from the upper part of the valley may be added Sooteas, Morans, &c. &c". This social composition in the eyes of the 'pernicious casteism' was 'low', and hence the Mayamara sect itself was considered as low. Thus, the followers of the sect were pushed to the precipice of a social landslide.

Nomenclature of the Sect: Searching for Roots of Discontent

The sub-sect of Aniruddhadeva's Vaishnavism was called *Mayamara*. An understanding of the origin of this name tells much about the formation of this religious community, and about the seed that contained the possibility of a future upheaval. It is stated that Aniruddhadeva first preached his tenet among the members of the fishing community living on the bank of a lake where a small variety of fish called Moa was found. It is further stated that these people used to kill (mara) the Moa fish and lived on fishing; and it was due to this reason that Aniruddhadeva's sect was finally termed by the non-believers as *Moamara* i.e. a sect of the killer of the Moa fish. There is no doubt that the Moamara is a contemptuous and derogatory remark used to ridicule the sect and its preachers who were proselytizing the lower echelons of the society. One of the Assamese chronicles, the Tungkhungiya Buranji, has clearly mentioned the Mayamara pontiff as 'Moamara.'

According to Hannay, “This residence of the first priest of this sect is said to have been on the Majoilee, on the banks of a small lake, which is now carried away by Burhumpooter. The name of this lake, from the circumstance of its abounding in a description of small fish, called Moa, was named in the usual style of Assamese phraseology Moa Morah, from whence arose the name of the sect, but which has been turned by those of the Brahmanical faith through a spirit of contempt to Moa Mureeah.”

That Aniruddhadeva’s sect was despised as ‘Moamara’, and that the term originated from the people who killed and lived on selling (or exchanging) the Moa fish, is also supported by some internal sources. Utsabananda Goswami, who was the Satradhikara of the Puranimati Mayamara Satra, has referred to an old biographical work to say that ‘Mowamara’ came from the name of a bil (fishing swamp) abounding in mowa fish and standing near the northern barrack (hati) of the original sattra.

There is an interesting myth recorded in the genealogical work of the pontiffs of the sect about the origin of the term Mayamara. According to it, Aniruddhadeva was believed to have possessed supernatural power for which King Pratap Singha (1603-1641) was said to have invited him, a heretic by religion by his (the king’s) own term, to show his miraculous power before the king. Accordingly, Aniruddhadeva was put to a test. The mouth of a large empty pot was covered with a piece of cloth, put before the public, and Aniruddhadeva was asked before the audience to say what the pot contained. Looking at the pot Aniruddhadeva is stated to have said that there was a large cobra inside the pot. The king was then inspired, having found an excuse to punish Aniruddhadeva. So, he opened the mouth of the pot only to show that it was empty; but to his astonishment, he found that Aniruddhadeva was right, and a large cobra really came out of the pot. However, Aniruddhadeva lost no time to quell the magical snake to show his further miraculous power. Seeing the entire event, the king called the sect of Aniruddhadeva as Mayamara, that is, killer of illusion (maya+mara).

There is no doubt that the name Mayamara was thus created to erase the name Moamara, which was not only ridiculous but was also one of contempt towards a supposedly heretic religious community. The discovery of a myth to defend the sect from being ridiculed is a clear example to show that there was an element of continued dislike of the Mayamara pontiffs against the orthodox Brahmanical section of the society represented by the other Sanghatis. The distinction is clearly recorded in the Tungkhungiya Buranji by mentioning the two factions as ‘Moamariya’ and ‘Bamuniya’. It is therefore clear that in parallel with the dislike was also a sense of protest from the Mayamariyas

against the Brahmanical order which, as we shall see, emerged under direct state patronage.

The Moamara or Mayamara is also known as *Matak* religion, a name the origin of which involves much controversy. It appears that the name was derived from the name of the Moran tribe who were also called Matak, a term which was also despised for being as low as the Moamara. The fact that some of the early British writers have mentioned the Brahmaputra-Dihing triangle on the southeast as Matak (region) is indicative of a tribe of the same name who were aboriginal to this region. Assamese chronicles mention a tribe called Matak who were subjugated by king Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam in the early 13th century.

Sometimes, it is also used synonymously with the term *Moran*, or else equated with it, and the Moran formed the bulk of the disciples of Aniruddhadeva. It is a fact that next to the fishing community, which formed the first batch of the converts, were the Moran alias Matak, a jungle tribe, according to the early British records; and among the converts, the Morans were the only single largest ethnic community which could give an identity to the religious sect. Thus, it was natural that the sect of Aniruddhadeva was also called Matak, a name that was used in much the same derogatory sense as the Moamara. As a matter of fact, there was an attempt to redefine it, as in the case of the creation of the term Mayamara, eradicating the tribal root. So, the same reason that was at work behind the development of the term Mayamara from the term Moamara, by creating a myth, had acted again to erase its tribal stamp by attempting to derive it otherwise. The genealogical work on the family of the pontiffs of the Mayamara sect, mentioned above, has attempted to derive the term from the conjugal word *Matek*, which means people of one (ek) opinion (mat). (There could not be coined, fortunately enough, any such word or conjugation to be used to define the name Moran!).

An explanation given for this derivation is that their tenet teaches men to be united in their views in their stress on the Guru, for, the Guru is more important to them than any other being; even God was treated as inferior to him. Grammatically infeasible, this forceful derivation of the name Matak on the part of the Mayamara pontiffs to eradicate the tribal origin of the Mayamara or Matak pontiffs, simply de-recognized the attempt of the Brahmanical society to undermine them. It was here that we find the root of an inherent enmity between the two religious groups. But this derivation facilitated one thing; it helped in the inclusion of its followers coming from various ethnic and caste groups into a single community stamped as 'Matak.'

In this connection one interesting development was the concerted attempt outside the Mayamara cult to defame Aniruddhadeva as a magician, who was alleged to have stolen a magical book from the store of Sankaradeva, and therefore, who was reported to have been publicly condemned by Sankaradeva. It was all publicized through, and recorded in, a book called *Adi Charit* or *Bhuyanar Puthi*, said to have been composed by Madhavadeva. The fact is that Aniruddhadeva was a contemporary of neither Sankaradeva nor Madhavadeva. Therefore, the famous Vaishnava leader and littérateur par excellence could not be the writer of the work. It was simply an attempt on the part of the orthodox section to defame the Guru. Be that as it was, in the tradition of the great saint Sankaradeva, Aniruddhadeva translated a part of the *Bhagavata Purana*, composed the *Bhakti Mangal Ghosha*, a book on prayer songs, about two hundred devotional songs, and a sacred book in both prose and poetry called *Nij-Sastra*. The last one is a secret scriptural work used in the society of the devotees of very high order. These writings supplied the ideological store of the sect.

The Revolt – The Reality

In the above socio-cultural background, there occurred a series of events of suppression of the Mayamara pontiffs by the state since the beginning of the Hinduisation of the Ahom kings. There is no doubt that the Ahom kings had no concrete religious affiliation to a particular sect. But, they were more attracted to the Brahmanical and Sakta practices than to the puritan form of Vaishnavism of Mayamara order. As a result, like the movement of Sankaradeva which was attacked in different ways by the Brahmins through the use of the state machinery, the sect of Aniruddhadeva also was subjected to the same sort of atrocities and attack in the later times. Assamese chronicles and the biographical works of the Mayamara pontiffs contain evidence to that effect.

Starting with the rule of Susengpha alias Pratap Singha (1603-1641), the Mayamara sect met with a tartar in the state machinery. This king, under the influence of the Brahmins, practised a series of cruelties upon the Sudra Gurus (Thakuriya Medhis - non Brahman preachers), killed many of them, and forced others into exile in the forest of Namrup (incidentally, the homeland of the Moran tribe). The king was informed that the disciples of Mayamara sect did not bow their heads before the king on the ground of their sectarian belief that this kind of reverence was reserved for their Guru alone.

Accordingly, four of the Ahom officers serving at the capital itself, who were known for their

affiliation to the sect, were summoned and put to a test in which three of them preferred death to submission, while the life of the fourth was spared through the king's own interception. M. Neog has stated that this "was possibly the first glaring demonstration of such all out devotion of the Mayamariya denomination to the Guru, which persisted through later centuries and made the rebellion possible." The same Brahmanical predominance prevailed at the time of the neophyte Ahom king Sutamla alias Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663). This king was so blind to his religion that it was said that the pontiff of the Dakhinpat Satra belonging to the Brahmanical order of Vaishnavism (Brahma Sanghati) was summoned to the side of his death bed when his time of death was nearing.

Even during his two successors – Chakradhvaj Singha (1663-1669) and Udayaditya Singha (1669-1671) – this predominance did not diminish. It is recorded that during the reign of Surampha alias Bhagaraja (1644-1648), the Mayamara Mahanta **Nityanandadeva** was killed at the Ahom capital at the king's order. His crime was that he was accompanied by a huge number of disciples to attend a king's invitation – in contrast to the others of his class (the Mahantas) attending the same invitation at the king's court. It was alleged that looking at the strength of his following the Mahanta remarked: "These Mahantas are nothing compared to me. I am equal to the princely family of the Tungkhungiyas." This being reported to the king commenting that keeping such a large following by a simple Mahanta, that is, Guru, is a blatant affront to the king, the latter ordered for killing the Guru by throwing him into the Dikhow river. His dead body was later recovered by his disciples who promised at the crematorium of their Guru to kill the king and his intelligence in order to repay the debt to their Guru (*maari jaaon, mari jaaon, Gurur rin suji jaaon*. We shall kill and get killed, and thus repay the debt of our Guru).

Thus, the conflict between the state and the followers of the Mayamara sect became inevitable. Udayaditya Singha took initiation from a monk from Gakula named as Paramananda Vairagi, and issued orders that the non-Brahman preachers should take initiation from Paramananda. This was resisted by the Sudra Gurus, particularly, by the Mayamara pontiff. Thus, a strong possibility of conflict between the state and the Brahmins on one side, and the Sudra pontiffs, and more particularly, the Mayamara pontiff on the other side, soon surfaced to a visible extent even as early as the early 17th century.

King Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696) bore a grudge upon Vaishnavism, particularly, upon the Sudra Mahantas and their so-called low caste disciples. Edward Gait has rightly pointed out that "the

neo-Vaishnava sects, founded on the teachings of Sankar Deb, had now attained remarkable dimensions. The country was full of religious preceptors and their followers, who claimed exemption from the universal liability to fight and to assist in the construction of roads and tanks and other public works. This caused serious inconveniences, which the Sakta Brahmans, who had the king's ear, lost no opportunity of exaggerating." The king therefore started persecuting the Vaishnava Gurus by adopting the same old method – deporting them to the jungle of Namrup. And among those killed there was **Vaikunthanath** of the Mayamara sect.

Thus, the second Mayamara Mahanta was killed by an Ahom king at the instance of the Brahman priests. He did not spare the disciples of the low castes, such as Kewats, Koches, Doms and Haris, who were hunted down, robbed of their property, and forced to eat the flesh of swine, cows and fowls. Under this order for penalty, the disciples of the Mayamara sect suffered the most.

Gadadhar Singha's successor, King Rudra Singha, went a step further. This king imported a Bengali Sakta Brahman called Krishnaram Nyavagish Bhattacharyya to Assam, and took initiation from him. He also made it a rule that since that time, all his descendants will take initiation from Krishnaram and his descendants, and that all Mahantas, irrespective of their affiliation, will henceforth have to take initiation from him. This king called a great assembly where he declared that henceforth no Sudra Guru shall have a Brahman disciple, a custom prevalent since the days of Sankaradeva.

The Sudra Gurus were also directed to worship idols, a system introduced to appease the Brahman Gurus. According to Maheswar Neog, "the tenet of Sankaradeva thus continued meeting with heavy rebuffs in the hands of the greatest Ahom ruler through the instigation of Brahman priests." Coming to the throne under this tradition his successor king Siva Singha (1714-1744), and his wife queen Phuleswari, went much further to insult the Mayamara Mahanta by compelling him to attend the Durga Puja held at the palace, and bow down before the idol, and besmeared their forehead with the stain of a sacrificed animal's blood, an act which was for them like going to the hell. Phuleswari also made them pay obeisance to the idols of the Brahmanical Satras of Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur.

This shows how the Raghunandan code of the Bengali Brahman and the Brahmanical sect of Vaishnavism (Brahma Sanghati) became united to form a house at the initiative of the state to fight the non-Brahman sect spearheaded by the Mayamara faction of the Kala Sanghati sect. This was clearly a planned act of Vaishnava persecution on the part of the state, and exclusion of the Sudra Mahantas from

governing the religious life of the people. The Mayamariyas therefore raised a protest, not caring for their life, which they sacrificed for the maintenance of their faith. Thus, as pointed out by S. K. Bhuyan, “The adoption of Sakta Hindum by the Ahom monarch followed by the conversion to that faith of his principal nobles introduced a new factor in the social and political life of the people tending towards the acceleration of that decline which had already commenced.”

By the second half of the 18th century, a conflict of a greater intensity between the king and the Sakta-Brahmanical religious group on one side, and the Mayamaras headed by their Guru on the other side, became apparent. The indication of a kind of rehearsal for that purpose was seen in the act of the junior pontiff, Deka Mahanta Gagini, in the year 1768, when he invited the disciples from all over the kingdom to build a big plinth, bar bheti, at the low-lying field called Malau Pathar near Jorhat by the side of their Satra at Khutiya Pota. It is recorded that eight lakh odd disciples gathered at Malau Pathar, and built a very large plinth for a prayer hall the remains of which still measures 900 ft x 200 ft x 13 ft (at the top) after a period of about two hundred and fifty years of exposure to erosion and demolition.

This act of building the plinth indicated what manpower the Mahanta could command if and when necessary. It is stated that after having thus assessed the strength of his disciples, the Deka Mahanta conferred with the regional leaders of the community, the Gaonburhas, and observed: “With all the large laity at my back I can be a king. They have killed our Guru. If my father permits, I can fight with these followers as my force.” There was no further development in this regard, but that there was a rehearsal to contest the state against oppression and insult on a particular sectarian community, now became clear.

In the summer of 1769 the war of succession came; and Mohanmala Gohain, elder brother of the deceased king Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769), who was deprived earlier of the throne, now put his claim and approached the Mayamara Mahanta for support. This shows that the situation that had emerged was not remaining secret by now, and the Mayamara Mahantas’ preparation to fight the royalty was a known fact. It was under this situation that Chief Executive of the State Kirti Chandra Barbarua insulted the Mahanta by returning with disdain the monthly presents (nirmali) sent by the Mahanta to the newly anointed king Lakshmi Singha (1769-1781). Two months after, the same Chief Executive further aggravated the situation by severely beating two leaders of the Mayamariyas – Naharkhora Saikia and Ragha Neog – who came to supply the king with elephants caught from the forests. It was in this situation that Ragha Neog shouted curses upon the Barbarua in the “name of the

elemental forces in the presence of all on the spot.” Ragma Neog was then carried in bandages to the Mahanta who exclaimed: “May the permission be given to lay down my life in order to repay the debt of the Guru [*deh eri Gurur rin sujibalai bolak*]”. The Mahanta, who had already borne heaps of insults and atrocities, now became sorely afflicted. He now gave permission to his son and the disciples to fight and dethrone the wrongdoers. With the permission of the head of the religious sect, the Moamariya Revolt became a reality.

The two leaders of the Moran tribe, Ragma Neog and Naharkhora Saikia, initiated the process at the Namrup forest with their own men to “repay the debt of the Guru.” The chief architect of the revolt was the Deka Mahanta, Gagini, who deputed the head of the villages (gaonburhas) to organize people of their respective villages to join the revolt. The revolt started in the form of a protest against the state act of felling down trees in the jungles of the Moran tribe. Assamese chronicles have recorded that the Morans raised the banner of revolt against the Ahom king’s order to cut down a kind of large tree called dhak in the forests of Namrup in Upper Assam, the home land of the Morans. “In the same year in obedience to the royal orders, the Barbarua sent some men to cut bardhaks or drums. These men came back and reported to the Barbarua that they could not cut the drums, as the Hati-Chungi Morans acting in a heretical and disloyal manner had made their own Raja and Barbarua and launched a war or rebellion.”

They also cut down the bridge over the river Dibru, and separated their territory as an independent zone. It is to be noted that the region of upper Assam on the banks of the rivers Checha and Dihing beyond Dibru formed the base of the revolt from where it spread to the other parts. There are historical reasons for that.

The Morans still form a major ethnic community of the Dibru-Checha regions. They along with their brethren, the Borahis, had their own Chiefs and territories when Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam, came from Upper Burma in the early 13th century. Sukapha and his men took over the territories and Ahomised most members of the tribes, and appointed them to serve the newly founded state with the supply of resources from their jungles, such as the wood, elephants, honey, fuel wood and so forth. Thus, while the Morans, at the cost of losing their territories to the incoming invaders, had also to lose their right over their own resources, the Borahis completely lost their identity as a separate tribe. There is no doubt that these tribes submitted to the foreign rule because of their lack of an organized force, being then under an inferior economy. But they nurtured a natural dislike against

the Ahom monarchy since inception as not only they had to submit to the intruders, but they had also to pay regular revenue to the state with whatever natural resources they had in their jungle habitat. The way they had subsequently protested under the leadership of Ragha Neog and Naharkhora Saikia against cutting down of trees in their jungle is a reflection of their traditional dislike for exploitation of their resources by an alien force. It was natural that they should unite, and at the extreme point of their exploitation, they would protest. The only requirement was an economy to sustain and a leadership to direct them.

By the 18th century the Morans had an established agrarian economy that they attained being a part of the Ahom system itself, and in the personality of the Mayamara Mahanta they found appropriate leadership. It is significant that the Tungkhungiya Buranji records how the Ahom forces used communal terms to heap contempt upon the Morans as an unsophisticated tribe (gandhikhowa Moran, i.e. eater of an insect having dirty smell called 'gandhi'), and despised them as 'Moamariya', being different from Bamuniya. Thus, the Moamariya Revolt was a result of both ethnicity and religion; while the first precipitated the organization, the latter provided the ideology to create it.

Assamese chronicles therefore very clearly named it as *Matak* or *Moran Bidroh*. According to Maheswar Neog, it is significant that even though the laity of the Mayamara Sattra was spread over the whole length of the kingdom from Sadiya to the Manas, the war of rebellion was to be spearheaded by the Morans under the command of a Moran leader, Raghava, and that the action was confined to a single line from the Mayamariya camps on the Checha river through the capital at Rangpur to the king's fugitive camp on the Chintamanigarh on another small river, Sonai, to the northwest of the capital.

The *Moran revolt* soon took the form of a civil war provoking various communities to participate. At the accession of the king Gaurinath Singha, it widely spread among the Kaivartas of Majuli and Jorhat living all around the Khutiyapota Satra. The Kaivartas were called in Assam as Dom and were treated with much contempt. In the caste hierarchy they were put in the lowest rank. There are references to the effect that they were put to various kinds of oppression and insult by the newly Brahmanised kings of Assam. It was reported that one of their members was killed by the king Jayadhvaj Singha, because he performed a congregation prayer at his house which he was supposed to have no right to perform according to the king. On another such occasion, a member of the same community was killed for his keeping long hair, which again his community was not supposed to do.

As we have pointed out earlier, the name Moamara was coined to ridicule the sect of Aniruddhadeva because he began his act of proselytization first with the people living on the bank of a fishing pond and killing and exchanging its fish. This attitude of the Brahmanical society attained more strength after the arrival of Krishnaram Bhattacharyya, a Brahmin from Bengal, and his Raghunandanian code. The emergence of the Brahmanical sect of Neo-Vaishnavism and the importation of the Sakta Brahman from Bengal, and their united growth under the royal patronage, proved detrimental to the subaltern communities which had experienced a lift and a relief from social suppression during the Vaishnava movement of Sankaradeva, and later within the sect of Aniruddhadeva.

It is surprising that the lift to the 'lowlies' allowed by the Mayamariya sect earned for it a low social status and social hatred. It is therefore natural that both the Kaivartas and the Mayamara Mahanta had a strong hatred towards the Brahmanical system and the state that patronized it. But they being handicapped in all aspects could not find enough scope to protest; fortunately the Moran revolt gave them that opportunity to rise in revolt. Thus we see the Kaivartas joining the Morans under their leader **Hauha**, who occupied the north bank and the Majuli Island, and ruled the area for a few years.

It is significant that the rebels meted out punishments to their opponents everywhere and fined the big Satras – Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur – in the Majuli island and Kuruwabahi on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, which got much of the royal patronage, to the tune of Rs. 8,000.00 from each of Auniati and Dakhinpat, and Rs. 4,000.00 from Garamur and Kuruwabahi. The development in the north bank and the Majuli Island shows that there was a strong Kaivarta element too in the total fabric of the *Mayamariya Revolt*.

The significance of the Moamariya Revolt perhaps does not end here. As we have pointed out earlier, the term *Matek* was created to form an integrated socio-religious community into which were brought a few ethnic elements other than the Moran and the Kaivartas. These included the Chutiyas and the Ahoms in the main. While the Ahoms maintained their state, the Chutiya state was occupied by the Ahom giving the Chutiya princes a simple zamindari status within the Ahom state itself. Assamese chronicles maintain how the Chutiyas continued to revolt against the Ahoms for more than a century for the recovery of their state.

It is significant that immediately after the creation of an autonomous territory for the Matakis in

Tinsukia in Upper Assam, Sarbananda Singha, its ruler, declared himself to be a Chutiya by clan (Buruk branch of the Chutiyas). The concern for establishment of an ethnic identity immediately after assumption of political power is not without significance. It is interesting that the Matak alias Mayamara community maintains within itself distinct ethnic identity for each of its social factions. Thus, there are Ahom Matak, Chutiya Matak, Kalita Matak, Moran Matak, Kaivarta Matak and so forth. The assertion of the Chutiya identity on the part of Sarbananda Singha can thus be seen as having a link with the Chutiya revolt after they had lost their state to the Ahoms. That this is not altogether baseless can be presumed from the fact that immediately after assumption of his power and establishment of an identity as a Chutiya, the Morans, who in fact created the revolt, became sidelined, and concentrated within the jungles far away from the capital at Tinsukia. This has been noted by Sristidhar Dutta in his *The Matak and Their Kingdom*.

It is due to this reason that there remained space enough for a second phase of the Moran revolt seeking a separate territorial jurisdiction and an ethnic identity, which are still marking the socio-political condition of this part of the country. Hiren Gohain, a noted social scientist from Assam, has therefore stated that the element of ethnicity cannot be ignored in evaluating the Moamariya revolt, nor can it be treated as a classical example of class struggle. Even Amalendu Guha, who has examined the nature of the revolt on a Marxist line, and emphasized economic reasons, at its background, has noted the predominance of the Kaivartas and the Morans within the Mayamara community, and the tribal character of their socio-economic structure that was under suppression from the state.

The Moamariya Revolt is a very significant event of 18th century Assam. It marked the beginning of an attack on what was typically medieval, and ended with the assertion of ethnic constituents of its society to political power and social right against a system of oppressive religious and political power. It was this trend in the assertion of identity and acquisition of political power that formed the basis of the history of 20th century Assamese society. The interesting aspect of this significant development was that the ideology at its backdrop was provided by a sectarian belief, perhaps like that provided by Sikhism in the growth of the Sikh struggle against the Mughal authority¹, and its organization by an ethno-sectarian community.

¹ S. K. Bhuyan writes: "The transformation of the Moamariyas 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 organizations was introduced as a result of the clash of the Gurus with the Government of the land." Cf. Bhuyan, ed., *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, pp. 256f.

References:-

- 1 Maheswar Neog, *Socio-Political Events in Assam Leading to the Militancy of the Mayamariya Vaisnavas*, Calcutta, 1982.
- 2 *Shri Shri Aniruddhadeva Charitra aru Mayamara Gosain Sakalar Vamsavali* by Chidananda Das, Chabua, 1933.
- 3 Maheswar Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam*, Gauhati, 1965.
- 4 Sristidhar Dutta, *The Matakas and Their Kingdom*, Allahabad, 1985.
- 5 S. F. Hannay, "A Short Account of the Moamarah Sect and the Country occupied by the Bur Senaputee," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, No. 80, August 1838, Vol. VII, Part II.
- 6 Edward Albert Gait, *A History of Assam*, 2nd ed., reprint, Gauhati, 1981.
- 7 S. K. Bhuyan, ed., *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, 2nd ed., Guwahati, 1963.
- 8 William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, reprint, Delhi, 1975.
- 9 *Ahom Buranji*, Raisahab G.C.Barua (trans), reprint, Delhi, 1985.
- 10 *Asam Buranji* obtained from the family of Sukumar Mahanta, S. K.Bhuyan, ed., reprint, Guwahati, 1988.
- 11 Maniram. Dewan, *Buranji Vivek Ratna* (Ms.).
- 12 Raj Mohan Nath, *The Background of Assamese Culture*, Shillong, 1948.
- 13 *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, S. L. Barua and D. Nath, eds., *Chutiya Jatir Buranji*, Guwahati, 2006.
- 14 N. C. Sarma, ed., *Darrang Raj Vamsavali*, Guwahati, 1973.
- 15 Lakshmi Devi, *Ahom-Tribal Relations*, Gauhati University, 1969.
- 16 Amalendu Guha, *Vaishnavbadar Para Mayamara Bidrohalai*, Guwahati, 1993.
- 17 Hiren Gohain, "Bingsa Satabdir Itihasar Uttaran Sankat," in the *Bingsa Satabdi Asam*, Golden Jubilee Volume of D. R. College, Golaghat, 2000.

[D. Nath is Professor, Dept. of History, Dibrugarh University; Paper reproduced from *Political Roles of Religious Communities in India*, Jayanta Kumar Ray, Arpita Basu Roy (Ed), Papers from a Conference organized by the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies

(MAKAIAS) in Kolkata, India, January 16-17, 2008]