

Continuity And Changes Among The Morans Of India: Economy, Forest, Culture And The State-Sponsored Modernity

Name: Sun Gogoi

Abstract: The study of indigenous groups with in-depth fieldwork has been the focus of anthropologists since long. Today such studies are not just confined to the discipline of Anthropology that earlier had a near monopoly over them, but are being pursued with varying degrees of skill and quality by scholars of other disciplines too, such as Political Science. Here the focus will be on understanding the socio-cultural aspects of the Moran community of Assam, predominantly inhabiting the Doomdooma region of Tinsukia district. The Morans are one of the aboriginal groups of people in Assam. The Morans had their own traditional belief system and social organizations which they have been maintaining till date in some transformed ways, even after the inclusion of Vaishnava belief in their socio-cultural sphere. Likely to many other tribes of India, neighbouring Jungles and their species and resources have had a crucial role in the socio-economic life of Moran villages. They can unanimously claim themselves as the 'son of the soil'. However, changing political scenario down through the centuries, and the colonial and the post-colonial modernity brought a number of changes to the socio-economic practices as well as political organisations among the Morans.

Key-words: Colonial, Culture, Indigenous, Jungles, Modernity, Morans, Post-colonial, State-sponsored.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Moran is one of the major ethnic groups of Assam. They speak Assamese and are mainly confined in Tinsukia district. Few Moran villages are located in Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Sivasagor, Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts also. However, it will be safe to opine that today their specific ethnic identity is alive only among the Morans of Tinsukia district. They are Mongoloid in origin. The Moran follows patriarchic family system and traditionally maintains joint family culture. They are followers of the Mayamara sect of Vaishnavism in Assam, introduced by Aniruddhadeva in the early 17th century. According to a survey carried out in 2007-08, the total number of Morans in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts is 83,583 (Mahanta 2013: 206). Morans are concentrated in a compact region comprising Saikhowa, Burhi Dihing, Doomdooma, Hapjan, Tingrai, Makum, Rongagarao Mouzas & Tipling in Tinsukia district in remote areas of Upper Assam. Morans have a prominent place in Assamese history and are known to have an independent kingdom in Bengmara (Tinsukia) prior to the advent of the British between 1805 and 1842. The Morans, along with their brethren Borahis were the first tribes, whom Sukapha, the founder of the legendary Ahom dynasty of Assam had to encounter when he entered Brahmaputra valley in the year 1228. On the basis of their racial and linguistic affinities, the Morans are generally ascribed Bodo origin. He won over the natives by the policy of both conciliation and coercion. The service of Morans was of great help in subsequent expansion and consolidation of the Ahom State for more than five centuries. However, for various reasons in the second half of the 18th century they became critical of the Ahom Authority and raised the banner of rebellion in 1769 under the banner of Mayamara Satra. Satras are the socio-religious institutions of Assam associated with the teaching of Sankardeva, a famous Vaishnava saint from Assam, and the Mayamara is a branch of these Satra institutions. The Mayamara (Moamaria) rebellion shattered the pride of Ahom Monarchy, and for the first time paved the way for foreign military intervention in the politics of Assam. However, taking a keen interest on the background, causes and outcomes of the historic Rebellion is not the

major concern of my paper, as my paper is aimed at assessing the socio-economic and cultural aspects of the Moran. Nevertheless, I must take into account the contemporary political scenario of Assam as the process of political transition in a society accelerates the process of socio-cultural transition of a group of people which comes under the jurisdiction of that greater socio-political system. The prolonged Rebellion (1769-1805) against the Ahom State led to considerable change in geo-political distribution of the Moran population, as many of them took shelter in the jungles or interior frontier regions surrounded by hills to escape Royal persecution or to organize the Rebellion. Moreover, it alienated the Morans from the mainstream Assamese society of the Brahmaputra valley as the erstwhile litterateurs of Assam and the dominant section of the society labelled the Morans as an 'uncivilized race' and blamed them for disrupting Assam. Some Morans disguised themselves as Ahoms overnight to escape the unrest, and with the passage of time they merged with the Ahoms. Wide scale Royal persecution and displacement of large number of Moran families to other places largely destroyed the village based socio-economic structure of the Morans. That process of socio-economic alienation continued throughout the Colonial era, after the annexation of Matak State by the British in 1842. Large swaths of land were grabbed by the British Government and their agents in the regions inhabited by the Morans for tea plantation under various Colonial schemes and agreements. The Morans too due their religious conservatism and ignorance were hesitant to join hands with the Colonizers and thus they remained sidelined. The British too developed a myopic vision about the Morans being backed by the erstwhile dominant discourse of Assam as the latter blamed the Morans for severely disrupting Assam as well for being an unpolished race. On the other hand, Caste Hindus from the very beginning of the Colonial era, and later on since 1920s onwards the other tribes of plains and hills of the undivided Assam joined hands with the British administration and became politically privileged in comparison to the Morans. Unlike the other communities of Assam, the latter joined the electoral politics of the state much later only after Independence since 1970s.

2. SOCIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND:

The Morans still regret the fact that their community would have been included in the Scheduled tribe list way back under the Government of India Act, 1935, when Simon Commission was appointed for the purpose in 1928. But there was no well educated person among the Morans to represent their case and as such they were left unnoticed. Now this community is determined to prove their tribal identity. The Morans call themselves "Habitolia" (people from jungles), whereas they call other Matakas "Mukolia" (people from open areas) (Gogoi 2007: 110). The Morans who have been recognized since 1959 as a More Other Backward Class (MOBC) till date, today are demanding Scheduled Tribe (ST) status from the Indian Government along with five other OBC/MOBC communities- Ahoms, Koch-Rajbangshis, Matakas, Chutiyas and Adivasis (Tea tribes). It remains a crucial issue in the electoral politics of Assam in the recent decades. Indigenous tribal bases and military adventurism led to small state formations in the pre-colonial era. Even during the Ahom era which once included almost the entire Brahmaputra valley under their jurisdiction the tribes of plains and hills were left to their own and the degree of their loyalty to the Ahom Government had always been fluctuating during the long six centuries. Among all the tribes of Assam, the Morans were closer the Ahom administration and they contributed a lot to the expansion and consolidation of the Ahom regime. E. Gait in his Report on the Census of India, Assam 1891 noted that the Morans had their own language which was akin to that of the Kacharis. However, when the process of assimilation and then Sanskritization began during the days of Ahoms, the Morans gave it up in favour of Assamese. Further, Gait in his History of Assam, states that the Moran language was undoubtedly Bodo. Major P. R. T. Gurdon in his article Notes on the Morans in the Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal also proves the affinity of Moran language with that of the Bodos on concrete linguistic evidences. It was further confirmed by G. A. Grierson. Some scholars like Kedar Brahmachari, Benudhar Sarma and Biradhar Das have a tendency to ascribe the Morans 'Aryan' origin. However, linguistic affinity as well as physical features and some other common characteristics of the Morans with the rest of the tribes of Bodo origin confirm that like the Kacharis they are a sub-branch of the greater Bodo ethnic group who speak Tibeto-Burmese language. S. K. Chatterjee places the probable period of migration of the Bodos from 2000 B. C. onwards. As regards the original home of the Bodos and thus the Morans as well, there appears to be a consensus of the opinion among the scholars that the trans-Himalayan origin i. e., the places near the head waters of the Yang-tse-kiang and Howang-Ho rivers, to the west of China and Tibet were the original place of these people. Important routes of migration followed by the different waves of these immigrants to India were through the courses of great rivers like the Brahmaputra, other routes between India and Tibet through Nepal and Bhutan, and later on through the Patkai Hills. Prof. S. Dutta remarked as follows:

"The Morans who perhaps came a little later than the earlier streams of the Bodos, occupied a part of the extreme eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley, vacated by their predecessors." (Dutta 1996: 59)

At the time of arrival of Sukapha, the Moran ruler Badaucha had his capital at Kakatal, identified by many with present-day Kakopathar, while the Barahis with their ruler Thakumtha had their headquarters at Tipam. The Morans and the Barahis were the first inhabitants of Brahmaputra valley with whom the Ahoms established close ties that were sanctified with matrimonial relations. Nevertheless, Morans are one of the aboriginal tribes of the Upper Brahmaputra valley. The Morans initially resorted to jhumming or shifting cultivation. Community feeling and corporate life grew stronger for pursuing such a culture of farming. These made the group leaders more powerful. During Ahom era although the process of assimilation began and they introduced the productive Tai-Shan culture of wet-rice cultivation, and instruments like yoke, plough and harrow among the natives, the practice remained largely confined in the mainstream Brahmaputra valley, and various tribal groups from both hills and plains continued their age-old practice of shifting cultivation. Unlike the Morans of present Sibsagar region who had largely been Ahomized and became a part of the Ahom society and system, the Morans who lived north of the river Dibru retained their separate ethnic identity and specific socio-economic culture and organizations. They lived under their own Gaonburhas (village headmen) and the nature of his authority over the Moran villagers was not only social, but political as well. Ahom Government never interfered in the internal affairs of the Moran villages. Referring to the Moran's relations with the Ahom Government, Gait (1863-1950) writes:

".....the Morans still survive as a separate tribe. At the end of Ahom rule, they occupied the country between the Dangari and Dibru rivers; they paid no revenue but supplied various products of jungles such as elephant, dye, honey and mats. Many now profess to be Ahoms, any they have adopted many Ahom rites and customs." (Gait 1926: 79)

Therefore, although the Morans adopted Mayamara Vaishnavism during the days of Astabhujdeva (1748-70 AD) it couldn't initiate any revolutionary change into socio-economic traditions of the Morans that was centred around primitive way of cultivation and the products of jungles. Only after few years of their conversion into Vaishnavism, the Moran community was destined to suffer catastrophic reverses during the prolonged Moamaria uprisings between 1769 and 1805. The terms Moran, Matak and Moamaria have been used synonymously by most of the scholars. Clarifying the specific meanings of the terms S. Dutta noted as follows:

".....Moran is a tribe and the Moamaria or Mayamara is a sect, the followers of which are called the Moamarias or the Mayamarias. The Matak is a composite term that includes all disciples of the Mayamara Satra predominantly belonging to scheduled castes and tribes." (Dutta 1996: 15)

Spread of neo-Vaishnavite movement in the area took place under the Kala Samhati, the most liberal as well as radical amongst the four orders of the Vaisnava faith in Assam. The Moamariya Satra was able to unite almost the entire Moran community. Later on, religious differences between the Ahom royalty and the Matakas (as the followers of the Moamaria satra became popularly known as) led to conflicts and helped in political polarization. The Morans

however continued to maintain their specific identity amongst the followers of the Moamaria faith. Morans, prior to their conversion to Vaishnavism were the followers of Shakta faith affiliated to the Kechaikhati Than, a shrine where mother goddess is worshipped. The shrine is situated in the Sadiya region of Assam, where till the late 18th century human sacrifices were carried out. At the time of conversion of Morans there might had been some understanding with the preachers under whom they were converted, that they should be allowed to continue their devotion to Kechaikhati (a mother Goddess who consumes raw meat). Probably that could be the reason why some of the rituals performed by the Morans are totally antagonistic to the general Vaishnava principle. Morans continue to perform sacrifices in the name of Kechaikhati, which are carried out in the Satra campus. Instead of buffaloes and pumpkins, now-a-days ducks and goats are sacrificed. The meat of the sacrificed creature is cooked in a house called Yagya Ghar (Offering House) situated inside the Satra. Morans carry out sacrifices of animals and birds on various occasions such as sharddha and kaj (death rituals). It is also done in the name of various gods and goddesses while going for community fishing in big rivers, before setting out on expeditions to catch wild elephants, hunting etc. Among the Morans, sacrifices are carried out not in the usual way of cutting the throat but by drowning in water. The Morans often call themselves 'Moran-Matak' to distinguish themselves from the rest of the tribes and castes that belong to the Matak community. Although the Morans had been represented in the All Assam Matak Sanmilan during the period 1939-65, they were always conscious about their separate identity as a tribe or specific group among the Mataks. Today, although the Morans are labeled as 'Moran-Matak', it can be noted that the civil society organizations of the Morans are named only with the term 'Moran', thus specifying their own identity excluding the term 'Matak'.

3. MORANS' TRADITIONAL RELATIONS WITH JUNGLES – LIVELIHOOD AND CULTURE:

The Morans traditionally possess some distinct cultural and economic traits closely related to jungles, which can't be found among the rest of the Mataks. During the days of Ahoms the Moran villages were found in the close proximity of natural cover of jungles, extending to hill tracts of the present-day Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar. Even today the majority of them are located in the same regions of Tinsukia district. Dambarudhar Nath in his article The Mataks and their Revolt against the State in 18th Century Assam - Searching for Ethno-Religious Roots noted (2008) the ethno-religious aspects of the Mayamara Rebellion. He remarked as follows:

"The Morans 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 Ahomized 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.....the Borahis completely lost their identity as a separate tribe.....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 locally called 'Gandhi')..... 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."

Ahom elephantry was practically monopolised by the Morans, who were the elephant catchers, trainers and care takers. The Morans had a khel (professional group) named Hati-Chungi that had experts in capturing and training elephants after which they were supplied to the Ahom royal household. According to the Tungkhungia Buranji (Bhuyan 1960), the forests of this area contained many valuable trees like Hollong, Tita sapa, Poma, Uriam and Som. It was also a very important source of elephants that were required for various purposes including that of war by the state. But the tradition of keeping elephants merely not as an animal, but as a family member makes this tribal group unique. Dilip Moran, a native from the Ubon village of Kakapather (Tinsukia) interprets their relation with elephants as follows:

"Elephant is our cultural property and we have been living together since time immemorial. Our ancestors came to this land with elephants." (Singh 2010)

Well trained in the catching of wild elephants, the Morans refer to themselves as the true friend of this beautiful animal. Several years of co-existence between the Morans and elephants have emerged into a position, that the elephants, now find an important place in socio-cultural, religious and economic life of the Moran people. Although, Morans are the elephant catchers, trainers and care takers, but the tradition keeping elephants, merely not as an animal but as a family member makes this tribal group unique. The Morans live in close conjunction with the elephant territory. However, they never violate the territorial respect, rather they believe in harmonious co-existence. Their love and affection to the elephant is well reflected in their culture too. According to a Moran folk saying, elephants are complemented to be one of the dearest member of the family. There is a saying among the Morans that:

"Atikoi Senehor nati, tatootkoi Senehor hati" which means: 'Grandson is dear to the grandparents, but elephants are the dearest'.

The elephants are not merely a property of pride and honour among the the Morans but they become their cultural symbol and identity. Most of the folk sayings, idioms and riddles used in the social life of the Morans are complemented to the elephants. They have a wealth of traditional wisdom which they apply in reading the mind of an elephant. They have good knowledge of elephant behaviour. In some instances, the Morans celebrate Hati Bihu in honour of their elephants. Remembering the past, Tarun Madhav Moran, a person from Moran community remarked as follows:

"Two and half decades from now, there were 15 to 20 Elephants in every Moran village. The surrounding of Moran inhabiting areas was abundant with large vegetation and thick forests. Those days every family of the Moran was capable of constructing the unique traditional house of this kind. But with the passage of time, the Morans gradually became unable to support their elephants as the forests and grassland got reduced with the intervention of human activities of felling trees and destroying the jungles. Middle class families among the Morans used to engage

their elephants for transporting these logs from one place to another and one could earn handsome money and could afford to feed their elephants. Now-a-days, they are unable to keep elephants. Keeping elephant in a Moran family was not only the matter of pride and prestige, but also a symbol of identity among us." (Singh 2010) The Bhoral Ghar (granary) that lies in the courtyard is apparently more interesting. The Bhoral structure is unique, and raised upon nine pieces of wooden log that are arrayed in rows. These logs are called Lotikai that sometimes are very huge ranging from 3 to 5 ft in diameter. Use of Lotikai in the Bhoral structure, is meant, not only to provide firm support to the entire structure, but also to present the underlying idea of their socio-cultural and economic relation with their elephants. It is said that in the olden days, wealthy people among the Morans used to construct as many as Bhoral ghar, some of which, they construct in the name of their elephants. They do not consume grains from those granaries which are dedicated for their elephants. They rather spend it for the care of their elephants. It is generally believed that the grains should be stuffed inside the Bhoral ghar in such a way that it virtually represents a fully eaten and pot-bellied elephant sitting in the yard. The side walls of the granary are used for keeping and hanging agricultural implements, fishing tools and sometimes large size ropes for elephants. Like many other tribal groups of India, the Morans consider themselves as the Bhumiputra (sons of the soil). They regard their jungle and its products as symbols of their cultural and economic heritage that are vital to preserve their self-sufficiency as well as autonomy. From the writings of Gait and several other sources it comes to our notice that the dense jungles in the proximity of Moran villages were very rich in various natural products, apart from elephants. The Morans were widely dependent on these natural resources for their livelihood, and the Moran officials appointed by the Ahom Government annually supplied a part of those resources to the Ahom Capital, as an act of loyalty. This tradition was introduced by Sukapha long ago in the 13th century. The Hati-Chungi Morans sincerely followed the tradition down through five centuries till 15th September, 1769. That very day two Moran officers namely Ragha Moran and Nahar Khura Moran were severely punished and humiliated at Ahom Capital Rangpur in front of all ministers and officials, as they were accused of providing unfit elephants by Kirtichandra Barbaruah. After one month, the Moran rebels led by Ragha cut down the bridge over the Dibru river, and thus made the territory inhabited by the Morans independent and separate from the Ahom State. Very soon with the consent of Astabhujdeva, the head of the Mayamara Satra of Khutiaputa (situated near the present-day Jorhat town), other disciples joined the Morans. A few exiled Ahom princes from Tungkungia Royal Family to implement their own political designs joined the Morans against their own brethren, seated at the Ahom capital. Interestingly 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 large trees in the forests of Namrup (then an isolated territory inhabited by the Morans) which would be used in making dhak or drums. But the Morans prevented the Royal wood-cutters from cutting trees. The

latter came back and reported the officials that the Hati-Chungi Morans had behaved in a heretical and disloyal manner and that the Morans had installed their own king and officials from among themselves. Thus, the 'first action' of the historic Moamaria Rebellion was marked by the protection of some trees at the jungles of Namrup by the local Moran villagers against the agents of the oppressive State. It can be called a protest movement by the indigenous Morans against the extraction of natural resources by the Ahom Government in their areas, as the former had begun to label the latter as an alien power or intruder. That's why the First Moamaria Rebellion is called Moran Vidroh (Moran Rebellion) by some scholars. The Morans use many plant species in their daily life as medicines, food, dye, for building house, preparation of household articles, etc. They also use some plant species like Tamol (betel nut) and Pan (piper betel) in their rituals and festivals. In Southeast Asia, chewing the leaves of Pan, with slices of Tamol and lime, is widely practiced for its mildly stimulating effect. There was hardly any systematic ethno-botanical works on the Moran of Tinsukia district till the beginning of this century. The Moran people depend on nature for their primary health care because of poor transport facility and costly treatments in towns. The Morans traditionally 'believe that medicinal plants available in their area are equally effective as modern medicines are' (Kalita & Phukan 2009: 74). Traditional Moran houses including granaries are weaved with bamboo matted structure. Roof structure is two-sided and thatched with locally available leaves called Tokou pat/Jengu Pat. The Morans traditionally consider the Hollong Gas (*Dipterocarpus macrocarpus*) as a 'sacred tree' for the Moran society. Hollong Gas is today the State Tree of Assam, and is generally found in Upper Assam, comprising the forest divisions of Dibrugarh, Doomdooma and Digboi. Recently a team of Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS) of Bhopal conducted extensive field visit to the Moran villages in Tinsukia district of Assam. An attempt has been made by the visitors to collect and transport cultural items of the Morans together with their traditional housing patterns. Subsequently IGRMS added traditional Moran house in its open air complex. In the month of April and May 2010, a team of Moran people from the villages of Tinsukia district of Assam were invited by the museum to construct Moran house of traditional pattern in the open-exhibitions. Moreover, they exhibited many items of their cultural belongings. The Moran house as an exhibit is open for the visitors.

4. AGRARIAN ECONOMY OF THE MORANS—LAND AND JUNGLES:

The present economic status of the Morans is pitiable. The ethnic Moran leaders are critical of the state-sponsored model of development as they consider it as an exploitative process that facilitates the interest of capitalists and businessmen from outside. Due to development of coal, petroleum and tea industries in the undivided Lakhimpur district during the early 19th century, the communication to and from this region developed rapidly. As a result, the first Railway of this region – the Dibru Sadia Railway (DSR) was introduced in 1881. Thus, Assam was connected to the outside world in 1895, when the DSR was connected to Assam Bengal Railway after which the rail traffic started

gradually growing in this region. By 1909, the places like Doomdooma, Makum, Ledo, Talap, Dangari, Hapjan and Saikhowa which are the traditional habitats of the Morans had been connected by railways. Already by the year 1880, around 60 tea gardens existed in various regions inhabited by the Morans. Development of communication on one hand paved the way for industrialization and impact of modernity in the region, but on the other hand it led to the process of land alienation of the natives and the change in the demographic and socio-cultural structure of the region. To settle the tea plantation labourers imported from outside, the colonial administration went on to grab more land from the Morans and their jungles. Illiteracy and ignorance of the Morans were being largely exploited by the colonizers and their agents.

“In the absence of a proper money-economy land was not yet considered as a commodity until the British colonial regime entered Assam in 1826. Thus commercial exploitation of various forms and dimensions were out of scene. Communal mode of production and relations of production were the characteristics of the village self-sufficient economy.....The most striking feature of the colonial system of production was the break-down of the communal mode of production, i. e. pre-capitalist mode of production and the relations of production, and the introduction of private ownership of land. This led to the collapse of the former.” (Paul 1989: 63-4)

To understand the alienation of the Morans from their natural resources one must take into account the rapid expansion of tea plantation in the undivided Lakhimpur district and the exclusive forest policies of the British Government in India. The Forest Act of 1865 was first attempt in the direction of regulation of forest produces by the forest dwellers and asserting the State monopoly over the forest. The state was empowered to declare any land covered with tree as ‘forest’ and to regulate it by notification, provided that such notification should not abridge or affect any existing rights of individuals or communities (sec.2). Now traditional practices of the forest people were to be restrained by law. So, the ‘customary rights’ of using forest products were transformed by this Act as ‘privileges’. The Forest Act of 1878 extended state’s authority over the forests by prohibiting certain activities in the forest areas like trespassing or pasturing of cattle by rural populations all over India. Thus, when the Colonial State asserted control over woodlands, which had earlier been in the hands of local communities and provided to work these forests for commercial timber production, it intervened in the day to day life of the Indian villages to an unprecedented degree. The Forest Policy Resolution, 1894 envisaged the supremacy of the State’s interest over the people’s interest. The sole objective of the policy was administration of the state forests for public benefit, but the commercial value of the forest has prompted the British Government to restrict the community use of the forest. Finally, the Indian Forest Act, 1927 deleted the reference to communities’ rights over forests, which had been made in the 1878 Act. Persons were expected to put in their claims over forest lands and forest produce before the Forest Settlement Officer who was to enquire into their claims. This Act has put some control on the shifting cultivation, which was considered as biggest reason of forest depletion, with certain special provisions. The restriction of communal

ownership of forests by the State severely destabilized the subsistence economy of the forest people. It forced many villagers to change their occupation. So, in the colonial period the legal and policy instruments transferred the right over forests from communities’ hand to government’s hand. During the colonial period the British planters kept on expanding the land area of tea gardens in the territories inhabited by the Morans which were surrounded by dense forests. During 1895-1920, the opening of jungles and fallow land in the villages in and around Tipuk Satra of Doomdooma for tea plantation largely alienated the Morans from the traditional area used as pasturage. Moreover, they were deprived of their old convenience of collecting firewood and other raw materials from the Government forests. Forest was transferred from the Union to State list according to Government of India Act, 1935. This authority of the state over the forest produces continued even after Independence. The first post independence forest policy was formulated in 1952 which is aimed at realization of maximum annual revenue from the forests. This belied all hopes of tribal people by higher regulation on their rights over the forest resources. New policy withdrew the right over forestland for shifting cultivation which was provided by the colonial predecessors in the form of ‘privileges’. Earlier the Morans practiced jhooming (shifting cultivation) which needs plenty of available land covered by forests. Even some of the Morans resorted to jhooming as late as the 19th century. A. J. Moffat Mills in his Report on the Province of Assam, 1854 noted that the Morans were largely migratory as they were habituated with jhooming cultivation. The soil of the region predominantly inhabited by the Morans was reportedly less suitable for Sali or wet rice cultivation, but was admirably suitable for the early variety of rice cultivation known as Ahu is generally called ‘upland’ or ‘hill’ rice (Dutta 1996: 129). Amalendu Guha observed that during the beginning of the Ahom rule, the local tribes like the Morans were associated mainly with the Ahu crop or shifting cultivation. Wet rice culture was traditional with the South-East Asian Tai people and it was introduced among the natives of Upper Assam by the Ahoms, accompanied by the process of detribalization and Sanskritisation through which various communities and tribes of Assam came into contact with each other. Many of the Morans merged with the Ahoms through the process of Ahomization and they adopted the socio-economic practices of the dominant and glorified group. Although paddy occupied a predominant position in the pre-colonial agricultural scenario, a large chunk of its production was influenced heavily by the prevailing practices of shifting cultivation (Bareh 2007: 74). Ahu crop which was largely popular among the Morans is traditionally shown broadcast in the fields in the months of March-April only. It is harvested in June and July. It takes a short duration to mature and so, sometimes allow a second crop to grow after it is harvested. But after two or three crops the Ahu fields use to become totally exhausted for many years. In terms of yield per unit of cultivable land, it is obviously much higher in case of Sali than Ahu because the level of natural fertility of the wet rice fields is constantly enriched by yearly floods. Moreover, the process of transplantation involved much more human labour inputs and care than Ahu which sown broadcast. Shifting cultivation was an outdated and anti-commercial way of utilizing land in the eyes of British

and they resorted to expansion and opening of the land areas for cash crops. It should be noted that apart from the lowland areas suitable for Sali or wet rice cultivation, the Morans were the owner of large swaths of upland areas prior to the expansion of tea gardens in their locality since 1860s onwards. Ghanakanta Moran, an activists from the Moran community noted that various tea companies like Doomdooma Tea Company, the Pabhojan Tea Company, the Rupai Tea Company, the Jokai Assam Tea Company, Tata Tea Company, Doomdooma Samdang Tea Division etc. were gradually granted more than 2,200 acres of land including jungles which traditionally belonged to the Morans (Moran 1998: 2). Moreover, during 1980s huge swaths of land that belong the Moran people were granted to the companies like Oil India Limited (OIL) and Indian Oil Corporation (IOC). The compensation paid to the owners was very low. For instance, when large amount of land in the places like Langkasi, Dhulijan and Barekuri of Makum region was granted to the OIL, the Moran owners were offered only 2,000 rupees per bigha. Moreover, for each matured orange tree which fell under the acquisitioned land, the owners were offered only 200 rupees by the Government (Dohutia 2016: 368). Today due to limitations of available forest lands majority of the Morans have left the tradition of shifting cultivation and become habituated with wet rice cultivation. They cultivate mustard, pulses and different varieties of vegetables. Historically the Morans has been expert horticulturalists. The National Horticulture Board figures noted that Tinsukia district has the highest productivity of orange with 18.5 metric tons per hectare in 2011-2012, which is much above the national and state average. Traditionally, the Khasi mandarin (*Citrus reticulata blanco*) variety of orange has been grown predominantly in many areas of the district, mostly by the Moran people and the fruit is popular across the region. The Tinsukia district administration in 2012 launched an ambitious five years project, "Mission Orange", to increase orange cultivation. Erstwhile Tinsukia deputy commissioner S. S. Meenakshi Sundaram opined that the Mission is aimed at bringing economic prosperity to the local people and thereby tackle the rise of insurgency. The eastern border of Tinsukia district is geographically contiguous to the dense forest areas of Arunachal Pradesh, and thus the region remains a strategic habitat for the anti-State actors from where they carry out their disruptive activities. Notably after the birth of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in the late 1970s, several youth from the Morans joined the insurgent organization. In the recent decades on many occasions common Morans have been becoming scapegoats between both the ULFA insurgency and the state sponsored terrorism by armed forces to tackle the former. However, a progressive decline in orange cultivation can be seen in the recent decades as most of the Moran farmers are shifting towards mix cropping with tea, which give them income round the year. There are very limited inputs used in the orchards, only few farmers who receive fertilizers and micronutrients from government department apply it to their field. The orange growers are gradually being tempted toward tea plantation i.e. another profitable venture on the same kind of land and agro-climatic condition. Even in this 21st Century, 99 percent of the Moran people live in rural areas and they are dependent on agriculture (Dohutia 2016: 257). Although they have sufficient area of land, lack of

scientific knowledge of agriculture, recurrent flood and deplorable communication system have led to the stagnation of the agrarian economy of the Morans. More importantly lack of 'work culture' among the young generation of the Morans pushed them into the lower level of economic order (Dutta 2012: 149).

5. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION:

The socio-economic and cultural traditions of the Morans have always been marked by their inalienable relation with jungles and its species and products. During the first five hundred years of Ahom regime the Morans contributed a lot to the expansion and maintenance of the Ahom State. However, later on due to growing sectarian rivalries, extraction of natural resources in their areas, growing ethnocentrism among the Morans and finally oppressive and authoritarian policies pursued by some Ahom officials made the Morans to break their age-old tradition of collaboration with the existing state-system and to raise the banner of a powerful rebellion which would turn the tide of political history of Assam. The military expedition carried out by the Ahom Government ruined the village-centric socio-economic structure of the Morans to a great extent and also changed the demographic structure of the latter. Apart from the Morans who perished in the Rebellion, many other Morans overnight disguised themselves as Ahoms to escape persecution and finally they merged with the latter. The socio-economic alienation of the Morans from the mainstream Assamese society as well as from the British administration continued after annexation of the Matak State and the formation of greater Lakhimpur district (1842). British tea planters' greed for land to expand the territories of tea gardens and colonial forest policy alienated the Morans to a great extent not only from their cultivable land, but also from their age-old right to use some of the most resourceful jungles of the area as their communal property. Thus waves of political evolution in the state brought about drastic changes in the socio-economic relations of the Morans with the state and the nature. Religious conservatism among the Morans marked by their inalienable relation with the Satra led to the further stagnation of the Moran society. Primarily a warrior race, being proud, resolute, simple, determined and sturdy people, the Morans have been unable to retain their place in Assamese society and have ended up being severely marginalized. Throughout history, every interaction of the Morans with outsiders has brought about several adverse changes to the Moran community. While the advent of the Ahoms reduced their political space, the interaction with the British deprived them of their landholdings, socio-economic status and employability prospects, thereby drastically eroding their social, economic & educational profile. Being farmers with adequate land holdings, Moran attempts at self reliance through agriculture gets severely impaired due to primitive agricultural techniques, inadequate supply & logistics infrastructure, recurrent floods and a culture of avoiding labour intensive work amongst the Moran youth. The civil society organizations among the Morans such as Assam Moran Sabha, All Moran Students' Union, Moran Jatiya Mahia Parishad, Moran Sahitya Sabha and even different Satras affiliated to the Morans are aimed at preserving cultural heritages of the community and bringing socio-economic development by placing their demands

before the Government. Reverence of Morans toward their Satradhikar (spiritual mentor and the head of a Satra) is a remarkable fact even in this modern century. Since the conversion of Morans into Vaishnavism till date their Satradhikars have often been seen playing political role in the Moran society down through the centuries irrespective of the days of Ahoms and the British or in the post-colonial Assam. Thus, the Morans still constitute a unique ethno-religious identity in the extreme east of the Northeast.

REFERENCES:

- [1] Allen, B. C., E. A. Gait, C. G. H. Allen & H. F. Howard. Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India. New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2012.
- [2] Bandyopadhyay, P. K. The Northeast Saga. New Delhi: The Director, Publicatio Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, Patiala House, 2005.
- [3] Bareh, E. M. (ed.). Encyclopedia of North-East India, Vol.2, Assam. New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2001.
- [4] Baruah, Sanjib. India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
- [5] Das, Munindra. Janajitkarana Dabi Aru Janagosthiya Andolan (Demand for Scheduled Tribes Status and Ethnic Movement). Guwahati: Assam Book Trust, 2015.
- [6] Dohutia, Shrikumar. Moran-Matak-Mayamara: Samaj aru Sanskriti. Dibrugarh: Banalata, 2016.
- [7] Dutta, Arun Chandra. 'The Socio - Economic Problems of Moran of Assam', IJCAES Special Issue on Basic, Applied & Social Sciences, Volume. 2, July, 2012. pp. 148 – 150.
- [8] Dutta, Sristidhar. The Matak and their Kingdom: Castes and Tribes of Assam. Allahabad: Chugh Publication, 1985.
- [9] Dutta, Sristidhar. The Matak, The Morans and the Moamaria Rebellion. New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1996.
- [10] Gait, Edward. A History of Assam. Guwahati: EBH Publishers (India), Indian ed., 2008. 1st published, 1926, Calcutta.
- [11] Gogoi, Lila. Beli Mar Gol. Dibrugarh: Banalata, 2007.
- [12] Guha, Amalendu. Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics Assam. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006.
- [13] Kalita, Dilip & Bonoranjan Phukan. 'Folk Medicine used by the Moran of Brahmaputra Valley, Tinsukia District, Assam, India', Natural Product Radiance, Volume. 8(1), 2009. pp. 73-76.
- [14] Mahanta, Nani Gopal. Confronting the State: ULFA's Quest for Sovereignty. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2013.
- [15] Moran, Ghanakanta. Bhumiputra. Tinsukia: Padma Moran, 1998.
- [16] Nath, D., 'The Matak and their Revolt against the State in 18th Century Assam Searching for Ethno-Religious Roots', in Jayanta Kumar Ray, Arpita Basu Roy (eds.), Political Roles of Religious Communities in India. A collection of papers from a conference organized by Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS) in Kolkata, India, January 16-17, 2008, <https://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/mayamara.pdf> - files on November 20, 2018 at 5:30 pm (IST).
- [17] Paul, Madan Chandra. Dimensions of Tribal Movement in India: A Study of Udayachal in Assam Valley. New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1989.
- [18] Sen, Sipra. Tribes and Castes of Assam: Anthropology and Sociology. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1999.
- [19] Singh, N. Shakmachha. Me and Museum: Morans and their traditional house in the IGRMS campus, 2010, <http://shakmachanongmaitthem.blogspot.in/2010/09/morans-and-their-traditional-house-in.html>