

The Identity of the Matak Community of Assam: A Socio-Cultural and Political Study.

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DOI: 10.47750/pnr.2022.13.S08.499

Abstract

The Matak community is one of the largest communities of Assam. They have a very rich and unique tradition of culture. They have also a very significant history about their origin and identity. The people of Matak community distributed many districts of the state like- Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Biswanath etc. It has tremendous and significant contributions to the socio-culture of the state Assam. The main objective of the study is to explore the socio-cultural aspects of the community as well as the political issues of the community. The present political scenario of Assam politics, especially the electoral politics is largely influenced by the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by six communities, and frequent agitations launched by them to place their demands in front of the Central Government of India. The Matak community is one among these six communities. The others are Tai Ahom, Chutia, Moran, Koch Rajbongshi and Tea Tribes (Adivasi). This study will attempt to analysis various socio economic features of the Matak community and identity associated issues.

Keywords: Identity, Matak, Socio-culture, Political, Community, Assam.

INTRODUCTION:

The Matak community is one of the significant ethnic groups of North-East India. The community is distributed in the districts of upper valley of river Brahmaputra. They have a great history about their identity and origin. But they have not followed any tradition of written history of their own kingdom like the Ahom kingdom of Assam. So only in some parts of the Ahom history we have found some written evidence about their origin and evolution. The term Matak refers to a special group of Mongolian people living in southern Assam. Golap Chandra Barua in his Ahom Buranji mentions that –‘The King Shukapha brought with him a Matak family from Tipam. This family formally used to supply the king with binjal. With headman of Matak family, the king sliders, advanced on conquering the Nagas. The Matak was liked very much. Afterwards, Kanghnhn Boraghain named him, Lanmakhru. In the ancient time, the Ahom king Shukapha conquered the Chutias, the Kacharis, the Mataks, the Barahis, the Nagas and one Khamtis war. They were allowed to remain as they were on the condition of offering tributes’ (Barua, 1985). In Ahom history the Matak people are called as *Phukau*, which is one of the sub-groups of Tai people (Gogoi, 2010). From the various evidences of Ahom history it has proved that Matak people are Mongoloid origin and they entered Assam before the Ahoms. They have their own tradition and culture.

The population of the Matak community at present is more than 20 lakhs, according to a memorandum submitted to the Narendra Modi government in July, 2014, by the ‘All Assam Matak Yuva-Chatra Sanmilan’ in collaboration with the ‘All Assam Matak Sanmilan’ (Das, 2015). Matak People live mostly in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sivasagar district and a great amount of people distributed in Dhemaaji, Jorhat, Lakhimur and Biswanath district of Assam.

OBJECTIVES:

- i) To study the social and cultural traditions of the Matak community.
- ii) To analyze the political issues of the Matak community.

METHODOLOGY:

The study is descriptive in nature and based on primary and secondary sources followed by different books, journals, articles, news papers etc.

SOCIAL LIFE OF THE MATAK PEOPLE:

Social life of the Matak community is very unique. The society of this community can be described as three-tire. The smallest group is the family; the household is run by the head of the family. As the family grows, it turns into a clan. Several clans comes together to form a *khel* or cluster. There are two types of cluster- cluster according to royal status and cluster according to religious traditions. Such clusters may include people from different clans. The society of the Matak people always maintains good order among social bonds and practices with the consent of all (Gogoi, 2020).

The Matak society is governed by traditional folk rules. From the early age to till date social life of the Matak people have been governed by a head. This head is called 'Gaonbuha'. *Gaonbuha* is selected by the members of society and it his responsibility to run the Matak society in a smooth manner. He should fix the days and times of festivals to be celebrated in the village. If necessary, he can punish the person who commits anti-social acts by expelling him from the society. The offenders can only be re-integrated into society by paying a fine and offering a rescue ceremony or *Udharani hokam* (Gogoi, 2021)

Agriculture is the main occupation of the Matak. They have been engaged in agriculture since ancient times. Initially, they cultivated only *Ahukheti* or Vegetables Cultivation. They learned to cultivate paddy only after the arrival of the Ahoms. The Matak continued to earn their living by agriculture even during the arrival of *Shukapha*. There is a story among the Matak community that the chief of the community gifted brinjal to the Ahom king and fed him. In addition to farming, they raise poultry and goats and some people also grow velvet for their economic stability. Currently, the Matak are engaged in other occupations too such as business, government jobs etc.

CULTURAL LIFE OF THE MATAK PEOPLE:

The cultural life of the Matak people is surrounded by customs, beliefs, folklore, songs, dances etc and these things are associated with various festivals which have been celebrated by them since immortal. The folk festivals prevalent in the Matak society can be divided into three main categories. These are –

- i. Agricultural Festival
- ii. Religious Festivals
- iii. Life related festivals

AGRICULTURAL FESTIVALS:

The Matak community celebrates some rituals related to agriculture. *Goshluwa*, *Nangal Dhuwa Pitha khuwa*, *Na-khuwa*, *Lakhimi Sabah*, *Bahag Bihu*, *Kati Bihu*, *Bhugali Bihu* are some of them. Each of these festivals is directly related to agriculture (Gogoi, 2020).

Gosh Luwa: The ceremony of *Gosh Luwa* is also called *Na-Bhui-Ruwa*. In this gosh picking ceremony, the first gosh or paddy is planted in the field by following some traditional rules and rituals.

Nangal Dhuwa Pitha Khuwa: *Nangal Dhuwa Pitha Khuwa* is one of other agriculture related festivals of the Matak community. After plowing and planting the field they celebrate this festival.

Na-Khuwa: *Na-khuwa* festival is celebrated in the month of *Aghon* and *Magh*. The main purpose of this festival is to eat new rice. If they are not able eat new rice in the month *Aghun* due to difficulties then they eat new rice in the month of *Magh*.

Lakhimi Sabah: The Matak considered goddess Laxmi as the goddess of agriculture. They believe that *Bharal* (Granary) is the true place of goddess Laxmi. They hold this ceremony sabah at the end of harvesting process. In this ritual, they offer prayers to goddess Laxmi.

Bahag Bihu, *Kati Bihu* and *Magh Bihu*: Each Bihu coincides with an idiosyncratic phase in the farming calendar. Like the other ethnic groups of Assam, the Matak celebrates *Bahag bihu*, *Kati Bihu* and *Magh Bihu* accordingly. The *Bahag bihu* or *Rongali Bihu* marks the New Year at the advent of seeding time and this Bihu celebrated on the sankranti of *Chot* and *Bahag* month (April), the *Kati Bihu* or *Kangali Bihu* marks the completion of sowing and transplanting of paddies and the *Magh Bihu* or *Bhugali Bihu* marks the end of harvesting period. *Magh* or *Bhugali Bihu* is a festival of eating and enjoyment.

Religious festivals and Life related festivals of the Matak community are also very prominent and unique in nature. Such as *Aai sakam*, *Bor Sabah*, *Bidhir-bedor sakam* etc are religious festival and *Duldiya*, *Panchamit*, *Prasuti hakam*, *Hudir hokam*, *Anthmongola*, *Doha-kaj* etc are life related festivals (Gogoi, 2020).

POLITICAL ISSUES OF THE MATAK COMMUNITY:

Assam has been witnessing several autonomy movements in their region by several tribal and non tribal groups to protect their own identity and culture. The Matak community is one of the major communities of Assam who has been demanding schedule tribe status and autonomy to protect their identity, culture and also for their constitutional safeguard. Along with them 5 other ethnic groups of Assam i.e. - Maran, Tai Ahom, Chutia, Koch Rajbongshi and Tea Tribes has been demanding tribal and autonomy status. It is because; they realized that without political power and constitutional safeguard all round development of the communities would not be possible.

Before 1911 the Matak people were considered as tribe but after that their tribe status was declined by the authority. From that period to till now they have been struggling hard for the preservation of their culture and identity. In 1959 they were enlisted within the 'More other Backward Classes (MOBC) of Assam (Gogoi, 2020). But they were not able to hold their old tribe status. So, they have been continuing their struggle for Schedule Tribe status and autonomy. The Matak people are more backward and they have all the elements and features to hold the tribe status from the government of India. It is important for their political, educational, economic and cultural up-liftmen. All Assam Matak Sanmilan and Matak Students Sanmilan constantly take many programs to raise their issue in front of central government and submitted several memorandums to consider their demands. As a result of all these, in 2020 government of Assam through an act of parliament provide them autonomy status but their ST status is not given yet. The political demands of the Matak along with five other communities of Assam have recently become crucial issue in the electoral politics of the state Assam.

CONCLUSION:

The emergence of political consciousness among various ethnic groups of the northeast India more particularly after the independence of India generated a feelings of assertion for the protection of their identity and culture. The north-east India, with its diverse ethnic communities, has been witnessing struggles ranging from the demands for various forms of autonomy to separation from the mainland India. Significantly, Assam, the most diverse and populous State in the region faces a number of demands by several ethnic communities in the State for various forms of autonomy. At present, identity issues and demands for tribal status of six communities of Assam have been occupying the whole political scenario of Assam. These communities started their identity movement with some non-political issue but gradually it turned to political one. It is because; they realized that without constitutional right all round development of the community would not be possible. In a multi-ethnic society like Assam each and every diverse group has their rights to preserve and protect their lingo-cultural traits. So, their demand for constitutional safeguard is significant in real sense of the term. The Matak community has their own separate evolutionally history and they are the aboriginal ethnic group of Assam. So, their all demands are justifiable and vital for their own identity.

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