

# THE MATAKS AND THEIR LIVELIHOOD: AN ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

The Matakas are a tribal group of people of Assam, belonging to Tai Mongoloid origin that lived independently in a territory of their own known as 'Saumar' region of Upper Assam before the advent of Sukapha and his team in the early part of 13th century into Assam. This tribal group is agrarian based consisting of agriculture as their main occupation. Although some of the people resort to other source of livelihood like tea plantation, business or government and private jobs but their number is very limited. They retain agriculture as their main source of livelihood generally by sticking with the traditional modes of cultivation.

**Keywords:** Matakas, Occupation, Agriculture, Assam, Livelihood, Tribe.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Matak refers to the ethnic tribe people of Assam who have been inhabiting in Assam since the pre-historic period of Assam. They had an independent sovereign kingdom of their own from Pre-historic period in the region known as 'SAUMAR' in the north east corner of Assam and the District of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia comprised of the Matak territory with its capital at 'Bengmora' (present Tinsukia town) which was later brought under the British rule by granting a political pension to the Matak Royal Family (Boruah & Gogoi, 2017). As the writing of Buranjis stated in Assam only after the invasion of Ahoms so information and data regarding the aboriginal tribes residing in this part of the region is limited and similar is the case with the Matakas. Known facts of history validate that the Matakas came to Assam long before the Ahom invasion but however in course of time and in the turbulence of historical events during the later medieval period, the Matakas who by tradition maintained their tribal cultures and dialect had to bear the brunt of misfortune due to incorrect listing of their tribal identity and as a result they lost their legitimate political benefits and other socio-economic privileges extended to the Scheduled tribe communities in India (Gogoi, 2013). They are now included in the list of More Other Backward Classes (MOBC) by the Government (Gogoi, 2013).

## 2. METHODS

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

## 3. DISCUSSION

The Matakas are the 'Sons of Soil' of Assam. Majority of them are agrarian based and considers agriculture as their main occupation. They do so by sticking to traditional agricultural methods and are far away from the influence of science and technology (Chetia & Rajkhowa). In the past, they resorted to Jhum cultivation (terrace cultivation) but since the British rule, owing to the expansion of tea gardens around their habitations and the consequent decrease of agricultural land they now give importance to Sali crop. Majority of people of this ethnic group earned their livelihood through selling of rice, jut, pulses, sugarcane, banana, orange, cotton and seasonal vegetables produced by traditional methods of agriculture. The remaining people earn their livelihood through

businesses or jobs but their number is very limited. Rearing of *Muga* and *Eri* (Endi) is another traditional occupation of the Mataks (Dutta, 1985).

Almost all the ingredients of the popular beliefs and concepts that exist in tribal societies are still controlling and influencing the material and mundane life of the Matak society like practices such as community fishing in rivers, to go for hunting in groups, collecting fire-woods in the jungles, performing songs and dances that help them to retain their characteristic features. In the same manner practices necessary in day-to-day life such as exchange of seeds for agriculture, bulls for ploughing, garden products like fruits, vegetables etc are still prevalent among them. The economic system of their society is still in a static condition as 90% of the agrarian Matak community is sticking to traditional methods of agriculture and cottage industry away from the influence of science and technology (Senapoti, 2017).

They cultivate rice only once in a year in the Assamese months of *Jeth*, *Aahar*, *Xaown* during the rainy season. However, drawing two/three lines in the name of ploughing in their respective fields in the months of *Phagun* before the height of rainy season as par traditional practice is a prevalent rule. They sow seeds of rice in the months of *Jeth* and *Aahar* and let them grow up in the paddy fields or in the enclosed gardens. The ground is prepared using spade and plough and then it is leveled four or five times and when it becomes muddy, rice saplings are planted (Boruah & Gogoi, 2017). The planting of saplings is done in every household in a festive mood. From each household comes at least one plough and sapling planters and they together make the auspicious beginning of planting the saplings of the year for the owner of the household. The owner of the household arranges a feast for them which give respite to them after the day's exhaustion. The oldest head of the family supervises such work and all other works related to cultivation by giving advices. The women folk go for a visit to the paddy fields (*pathar phure*) at the time of sprouting of the paddy in the months of *Aahin-Kati* (Boruah & Gogoi, 2017). Such visits, they believe causes more production. The youths burn dry leaves and grasses on the ant-hills carefully preserved in the fields in order to smoke away the harmful insects.

The paddy or the rice plants become ready for reaping usually in the months of *Aaghon-Puh*. The head woman of the family or the owners wife goes to the field along with her companion and servants and collects some tips of rice plants in sheaves, ties them with tender plantain leaves before bringing them into the granary. After this bringing of the tips of rice plants (*aag-ona*) starts the whole scale reaping of the harvest. The grown up paddy is reaped with sickle, tied in sheaves or bundles of equal size and are kept in the field itself serially from one side when these become dry in the sun, the men folk collect them in bundles tied to a stick and bring home to the granary. After the completion of reaping and gleaning, the last gleaning is brought through certain rituals and the granary is locked. It is only after about two months and after performing certain rites that the granary is opened, the rice bundles are brought out and placed in the courtyard and the women folk separate the rice seeds or grains from the bundles by trampling over them, winnow them and thresh the rice in the *Dheki* (a foot-operated wooden see-saw grinder or pounder used in the rural areas for threshing).

Rearing *Muga* and *Eri* (Endi) in the months of *Aahar-Xaown* is also another traditional occupation of the Mataks. *Barmuga* (Large sized muga caterpillar) is raised in *Chomanibari* (gardens filled with *Chom* trees) and *Horumuga* (small sized *muga* caterpillar) is raised inside the household. Besides weaving necessary clothes from *muga* and *eri* they also earn some amount by selling *muga* threads or yarns. Keeping a plot of land for *chomanibari* for *chom* plantation for rearing of *muga* caterpillars and a plot for *era* tree (castor plant) in the corner of the garden may be called almost a rule or common practice among the Mataks. This cultivation is usually called *muga* and *eri* cultivation. Besides for food items like mutton, fish or eggs, the Mataks dig ponds in the fields and rear poultry at home. There are also public ponds dug by the people together where plenty of fishes are kept for use of the public or the community as and when necessary. Necessary implements and appliances for agricultural works such as plough, yoke, ladder, *lahoni-dehoti* (implements made of wicker materials) for spilling away or draining out water, sickle for reaping, *Dheki* (thresher), various types of containers for grains etc are made by themselves at home. To remain self dependent the Mataks also cultivate various pulses like black gram, mug, potatoes of different types, *rahar dal*, mustard, sugarcane, cotton and various vegetables of winter. They crash mustard seeds for oil, sugar for molasses and treat cotton seeds to make

yarn or threads on their own. Necessary implements and appliances for such purposes are also made by them at home (Chetia & Rajkhowa, 2017).

The wind of systematic and modern agriculture methods is yet to reach the Matak society. There doubts and suspicions towards such modern processes of agriculture also are reasons behind sticking to traditional agricultural practices. They trust more on the traditional methods of agriculture which are based on nature. Although a tendency among the new generation has grown up for tea plantation with advanced methods but only about 15% has been able to take it up as a means of livelihood or occupation for want of marketing knowledge and skills and lack of facilities for outlet (Gogoi, 2013). Consequently the community is still backward socio-economically in respect of education. Few people have formal education but except a few doctors and engineers there are not many highly educated persons in the Matak community. As a result majority of the people remains unemployed. On the other hand there is lack of infrastructure, practical knowledge and skill that can lead to an environment of work culture among them.

Although rice is their staple food, they eat almost ever food that does not harm the body, that is tasty and delicious both vegetarian and non vegetarian. The Matak have a very strong sense of community bond and their village life is generally community centered. They, as a rule give importance to co-existence and living in close proximity together, forming neighbourhood based on *khels* (guilds or social units on the basis of occupation, religion, social behavior etc). Accordingly, a *chuk* or *chuburi* (a neighbourhood) is formed and becomes known by the name of the *khel* or by the name of the past headman of the *khel*. An ethnic propensity of the Matak tribe is that they feel a close relation and kinship with various professions and occupations of the way of jungle life. They prefer to live in riparian, jungle and calm and quiet areas away from the din and bustle of the busy urban life.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The Matak may be termed as an agrarian tribe like the Santhals of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. They construct a *tangighar*- a type of hanging house on the branches of a tree to watch the paddy fields and to protect the field from harmful birds and animals. Their methods of *Jhum* cultivation (terrace cultivation) was destroyed by the gradual expansion of tea gardens by the British. In the low lands *Sali* rice is cultivated with traditional methods. Similarly, in the agricultural plots adjoined to the residential houses (*bari*), they traditionally cultivate betel-nut, betel-leaves and various other varieties of fruits and vegetables. Since ancient times, they have been cultivating cotton and they produce cloth items such as *gamosha*, *chadar* etc. they also preserve plots of cattlefield and bamboos. In short, the Matak of Assam is an agricultural based ethnic group.

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