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Neo-Vaishnavism to Insurgency:
Peasant Uprisings and the Crisis of Feudalism
in late 18th Century Assam

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P R E F A C E

THE AUTHOR'S interest in the class character of the peasant uprisings of 18th-century Assam began with the publication of his article entitled 'the Moamaria revolution: was it a class war?', as far back as in 1950. This raised a number of other related questions, all of which remained unanswered for another decade and a half. Under the circumstances, the author decided to examine afresh in depth the relevant source materials, particularly Assamese chronicles, for a reinterpretation of the history of medieval northeast India, and also its subsequent transition, in the framework of a Marxist methodology. Results of this research began to appear intermittently since 1966 (see footnote 7 below), and all these constitute the background for the present paper.

There is now enough evidence to conclude that the peasant uprisings, described and analysed here, essentially reflected a political conflict between the feudal ruling class and different segments of the exploited peasantry. The contending classes might not have been collectively self-aware as such, not the peasants at least in any case; yet the people decided to be on this or that side of the barricade during the prolonged civil war (1770-1809 A.D.), by and large, according to their own respective class positions. This happened in spite of their lack of a strong explication of consciousness of class identity in either camp or, in the case of the peasantry, of even coordination and sustained unity beyond local limits. The Assam case once more shows that class was not primarily a subjective happening, but an objective formation, and that peasant resistance to exploitation was inherent in the relationship of such objective formations, as G.E.M. de Ste Croix has so convincingly argued in his The Class Struggle in Ancient Greek World : From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests (London, Duckworth, 1981). In his view, the substitution of class by the Weberian concept of status-group within a hierarchy may be all right, even useful, to a historian as a descriptive category, but in no case does it help him to radically explain change.

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Amalendu Guha

NEO-VAISHNAVISM TO INSURGENCY : PEASANT UPRISINGS
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CENTURY ASSAM

A series of popular revolts in the eighteenth century shocked the foundations of the 600-year old Ahom Kingdom repeatedly during the years 1769-1809. These revolts, described in the Assamese chronicles as Moamaria/Matak Troubles, were indeed a lingering civil war that ended indecisively with both the warring camps being totally exhausted and ruined. So fierce had it been that the population went down to a fantastically low level as a result of the massacres and famines that followed. The population came down to one-half of what it was before.

The Moamarias were the followers of the Moamara (Mayamara) Satra - a numerous neo-vaishnavite sect, comprising members from all castes and ethnic groups by the time the troubles started, with a preponderance of tribal neophytes and 'low' caste people. The Morans, a plains tribe, e.g., belonged almost en masse to this sect. In the chronicles, they are frequently and interchangeably referred to also as 'Mataks'.

Despite their apparent concern for an objective approach and accuracy of facts, the extant chronicles of the period are generally biased against the rebels and, in spirit, partisan.¹ Contemporary English records - by-products of the East India Company's armed intervention in

* In this paper the terms, 'tribe', 'peasant' and 'feudalism' are used in their broad senses, their specific contexts and contents being noted whenever necessary. In the matter of transliteration, no particular system is strictly adhered to. The author is indebted to Barun De and Ratan Dasgupta for their comments on an earlier draft which helped finalise this paper. The central arguments of this paper were first presented in the form of a lecture at a symposium organised by the Indian History Congress, 1975 in the Aligarh University. An Assamese version of this lecture was later serialised in the now-defunct Assamese monthly journal, Amar Pratinidhi, Vol.16, 17 and 19, Feb. 1976 to Sept. 1979.

favour of the tottering regime - view the events simply as a law and order problem.² Yet a third important source is received tradition. Preserved in late quasi-historical accounts of the involved neo-vaishnavite monasteries, this tradition is now available only in a distorted form.³

A close examination of all these materials bears out the democratic and anti-feudal character of the revolts. S.K. Bhuyan suggests that the Ahom feudatory lords held to the bulk of the people the same relation "as the Normans did for generations in England" and that, by the right of joint conquest, they enjoyed hereditary right in the soil and in all important public offices. The "attachment of the subjects to their immediate overlords, viz., the kheldars to whom they were tied by hereditary obligations", he notes, "was greater than to their distant government at the capital".⁴ He even casually draws an analogy of the situation with the English civil war between the Cavaliers and the Roundheads.⁵ Neither his analysis of the complex causation of the event at the surface level nor the mechanical analogies he draws, however, does take our understanding of the relevant feudal crisis and its dialectics far enough.⁶ Hence, an attempt is being made in the following pages to re-arrange the known facts and stretch the analysis in new directions for a re-interpretation of the event in terms of the social forces then in operation. In doing so, I have drawn heavily on some of my earlier related enquiries into the field.⁷ This study is in three parts. The social development towards feudalism and its replication in ideology, i.e., the origins of feudalism and neo-vaishnavism and their subsequent inter-action, are traced in Part One. In Part Two, a narrative of the three successive phases of the civil war is presented. Conclusions of this study finally appear in Part Three.

Economic and Social Background

The neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam, led by Shankardev (1449-1568) and his disciples - Madhavdev (1489-1596), Damodardev (1488-1598) and others during the 16th-17th centuries - popularised an inexpensive, congregational form of religious practice and the monotheist cult of bhakti. Its message was that anyone, irrespective of birth, caste or status, could attain salvation by taking refuge in its four elements - (i) God, (ii) guru (preceptor), (iii) bhakats (devotees) and (iv) nama (the chanting of the divine Name). The vaishnavas were enjoined upon to devote sole attention to Vishnu alone, to the exclusion of other gods, their temples and their prasada (offerings made before them). This new faith rapidly spread involving, in due course, a majority of the Assamese people.⁸ Based on the teachings of the Bhagavata-purana, it came to be known in Assam as the bhagavatii dharma or eka-sharana-nama-dharma. Associated with it was a cultural renaissance, humanist in content and popular in form, in the fields of literature as well as vocal and visual arts.

Having the same basic content as that of its all-India model, the bhakti movement of Assam had nevertheless several distinctive features of its own. Dasya was its commended form of devotion. The concept of master-servant relationship, assumed between God and man, was thus projected also into the relation between the guru and the proselyte. For, both God and the guru were deemed as one, being different only in body. The concept was institutionalised in the form of the sharana ceremony, i.e., the formal spiritual initiation or ordination of the proselyte. It highlighted the total submission of the latter to his guru and to the three other elements of the cult.⁹ In return, the guru

took the proselyte under his spiritual protection. Clearly the feudal model of a personal bond between the master and his serf was projected into this relationship. The proselyte regularly paid a tithe (guru-kar) to his spiritual lord.

The most distinguishing feature of Assamese neo-vaishnavism is however a network of decentralised monasteries (satra), each headed by a guru (designated as the mahanta, goswami or satradhikar). Proselytization was their most important function. The number of such monasteries went on proliferating and, by the end of the seventeenth century, they could be grouped into four competing Orders or samhatis - (i) Brahma, (ii) Purusha, (iii) Nika and (iv) Kala - in accordance with the ideological differences that had cropped up meanwhile. The first one upheld the supremacy of the brahmins in all matters even within the vaishnava fraternity. It also zealously conformed to all Vedic rites and to idol worship. Monasteries of this Order had invariably brahmin abbots. The other three Orders had varying reservations on these points. The most non-conformist of them was the Kala-Samhati Order, which originated from the interpretation of the teachings of Shankardev and Madhavdev by Gopaldev (1541-1611). It is interesting to note that all these three reformers were kayastha by caste and were of bhuyan descent.¹⁰ It was the monasteries of the Kala-Samhati Order that had the largest following amongst the despised castes and tribal neophytes. The Moamara Satra belonged to this Order.

Monasteries at various centres generally originated from the camp headquarters of the early neo-vaishnavite missionaries. Vamsigopaldev (1548-1634), a brahmin, Aniruddhadev (1553-1626), a kayastha of bhuyan descent, and Bar-Yadumanidev (1564-1618) were amongst those early pioneers who carried the neo-vaishnavite message to the rural masses of

eastern (Upper) Assam. In due course, there were several hundred monasteries in the Brahmaputra Valley, each linked with a number of villages. Each village had its own community prayer-hall (nam-ghar) for holding religious discourses and village meetings. Both Satras and Namghars were simple constructions of wood and bamboo with thatched roofs. The monasteries gradually evolved their own hierarchy of functionaries to manage properties and collect tithe from the initiated devotees. Many of them became rich in due course, particularly so, when endowed with grants of waste-lands and serfs under royal patronage.

The proselytising function of the monasteries helped the ongoing process of sanskritisation of the Ahom and the tribal folk in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Ahoms were accepted as a low-ranking new Hindu peasant caste. The tribal neophytes, admitted first to the lowest rung of the caste ladder, had opportunities of upward social mobility through emulation of the higher castes. Individuals and groups did not only move from animism to vaishnavism, but also from tribes to peasant castes; from pile houses to mud-plinth-houses; from the burial practice to cremation of the dead; from liberal food habits to abstinence from liquor, beef and pork; from a shifting to permanent cultivation, and so on.¹¹

Agriculture was multi-form, with its settled and shifting sectors co-existing side by side. Both the Assamese-speaking Hindu mainstream of the population as well as the Tai-speaking migrant Ahoms cultivated transplanted wet-rice (salt). As literate, plough-using peoples, they were long accustomed to live in politically organised societies. The remaining population, belonging to tribes with diverse languages, were associated with shifting slash-and-burn cultivation with hoes and digging sticks. They raised dry-rice (ahu) sown broadcast. A section

of the Bodo-Kachari tribe were, of course, undergoing a transition from the hoe to plough and from dry-rice to wet-rice cultivation. Though united by the communication channels of the Brahmaputra and its navigable tributaries, the Assamese, Ahom and tribal settlements had long remained segregated from each other in several States which were then at uneven levels of sophistication. However, the aforesaid process of social and economic change began to culminate in their gradual acceptance of Assamese - the dominant language of the valley - via an intervening phase of bilingualism, visibly since the end of the fifteenth century. This coincided with a simultaneous process of feudal consolidation in space and hierarchy.

The scene was dominated during 13th-16th centuries by two rival political systems - (i) a loose confederacy of hierarchical petty feudal chiefs (bhuvan rāj), thriving on the ruins of an erstwhile imperial tradition that was Kamrupa and (ii) the rudimentary semi-feudal state formations emerging directly from tribes, e.g., the Chutiya, Kachari and Ahom Kingdoms. A continuous expansion of the permanent wet rice cultivation meanwhile enabled the disparate peasant societies to yield an increasing surplus and thus lay the basis for a more sophisticated state system. The extension of transplanted wet rice cultivation was particularly rapid in the Ahom Kingdom. This led to an increase in the population which, in turn, facilitated further extension of cultivated acreage.¹² Having absorbed the Chutiya Kingdom by 1523, the Ahoms continued to expand their domain southward and westward at the cost of the Kacharis and the bhuyans. The Koch Kingdom, too, expanded at the cost of the petty bhuyans of western Assam about the same time. The Kochs clashed with the Ahoms, defeated them and even sacked their capital in 1562. The former's superiority stemmed from an economic base that had - because of an earlier contact with the Hindu society - a

relatively greater division of labour in terms of professional castes. Since then mutual Koch-Ahom contacts gave rise to an integrative process that helped both, but the Ahoms more. As a result, in course of the seventeenth century, the latter were able to emerge as the masters of the whole Brahmaputra Valley excepting a part of Goalpara that was ceded to the Mughals. Incidentally, in the Ahom Kingdom, peasants' private property rights were not recognised over wet rice lands. Such rights were vested in the community represented by the King. Every household customarily possessed three types of land - (i) a hereditary homestead plot held as private property, (ii) dry crop lands reclaimed at private initiative and held as private property as long as cultivated and (iii) a portion of communally-owned wet-rice lands, subject to redistribution from time to time. Forests and marshes were villagers' common lands.¹³

Before the rise of neo-vaishnavism, the bhuyans and the tribal chiefs were patrons of localised mother goddess cults, rooted in degenerate Tantric-Buddhist and tribal fertility rites. Their magico-religious faith reflected the existing fragmentation of the society and it sanctified cruelty and bloodshed as necessary conditions of survival. Even the Tai-Ahom religious cult - a form of animism tinged with elements of ancestor worship - had the same spirit. It suited the early Ahom feudalism that was emerging from a tribal base. The hierarchy of Tai-Ahom gods, e.g., was only a projection on the mental plane of the incipient trans-tribal feudal society the Ahoms lived in.¹⁴ At that unconsolidated stage, incipient feudalism, like its tribal base, lacked a world view. But the ongoing process of abridgement of political fragmentation, as noted, warranted the advent of a new ideology - a universal religion - by the early 16th century.

The Koch King Naranarayan (1540-84), found the neo-vaishnavite movement convenient for his expansionist drive to bring the whole of Assam under his suzerainty. After all, the sword and the bhāgavat, both served a common purpose. Both attempted to bring disparate tribes together and wield them into an integrated social order. "Ek dev ek sev, ek vine nahi kev" - this neo-vaishnavite concept of undivided loyalty to one deity alone could not but indirectly help the ideal of one people under one monarch. Even the Ahom Kings, who were initially hostile or indifferent to the movement during the 16th century, gradually felt the need of winning it over to their side. By the mid-17th century we had the first Ahom King to embrace the faith. For neo-vaishnavism was essentially a feudal ideology that was helping detribalisation of the society in transition.

The above is obviously not a sufficient explanation of the advent of the new ideology in Assam; there were other factors, too. By the 16th century, a stratum of artisans and traders (still linked with agriculture) had emerged from Assam's peasant society, particularly in its western part. Increasing volume of trade, however limited still in absolute terms, necessitated not only considerable mobility on the part of these elements, but also local coinage to augment the money supply, until then consisting of only cowries and Bengal currency/ⁱⁿ limited circulation. Introduction of muskets, cannon and gunpowder in the region since the 16th century tended to strengthen a reigning monarch in relation to others. Under the circumstances, the political and cultural consolidation of the valley emerged as an immediate possibility. These developments needed a supporting ideology that would cut across tribal and early feudal fragmentation, then in existence, and legitimize the feudal rule. Neo-vaishnavism proved to be such an ideology at that stage.

The popularity of neo-vaishnavism stemmed from its democratic content - its creed that all men were equal in the eyes of God, that the expensive rituals were meaningless and that a spiritual preceptor could be chosen from any caste even by a brahman. This stand did not pose a fundamental challenge to the existing caste rules in the social sphere; it only tried to modify them at the spiritual level. For example, social taboos in regard to commensality, not to speak of inter-marriages, were strictly conformed to. The neo-vaishnavite attitude to the observance of Vedic rites and to the worship of idols in day-to-day life was ambivalent and compromising. In theory an ideal bhakat, i.e., a devotee free from worldly attachment, was not to observe the shraddha and such other rites, nor to indulge in idol worship. Nevertheless, householder bhakats were enjoined upon to observe these rites strictly, and they were permitted to worship idols.¹⁵ Thus neo-vaishnavism compromised with conservative forces to enhance its acceptability. For the same reason, it also conceded that a ruling monarch was duty-bound to observe all traditional rites, including blood sacrifices, to sustain the welfare of his subjects.¹⁶ Despite its preaching of ahimsa, it hardly reacted to the inhumanly cruel forms of execution and other corporal punishments then in vogue. Nor was the institution of slavery condemned by the reformers, though there is evidence of their being kind to oppressed slaves.

Amongst those who responded first to the bhakti movement were some learned kayastha bhuyans, recently dispossessed of political power, a few brahman intellectuals and many professional artisans and traders. Madhavdev and Vamshigopaldev had opted for a trading profession before joining the movement. Narayandas alias Bhabananda (1495-?) prospered as a trader and used his wealth to promote the cause. Mathuradas, who rose to be the abbot of the Barpeta Satra, was the head of a weavers'

guild. Damodardev had twelve weavers as his apostles.¹⁷ There is evidence to show that weavers and members of other professional castes and crafts joined the movement in large numbers and continued to maintain their special links with the monasteries, particularly in western Assam.¹⁸ In due course, the peasants also were drawn into the movement.

That the movement succeeded, despite its limitations and compromises, in materially undermining the influence of the traditional priests is amply indicated by the indignation it aroused in their camp. Neo-vaishnavite preachers were charged by them of inter-dining, of violating Vedic rituals and of subordinating brahmans to shudras. The former generally pleaded not guilty to these charges, but there were always some extremists amongst them who would push the ideology to its logical end on such matters. For example, in the reign of Pratap Simha (1603-41), Mukunda Gosain, who was a brahman by birth, held brahmanical marriage rites, the sanctification of new tanks and the wearing of the sacred thread as unnecessary rituals. He even dared perform his own daughter's marriage without the accompanying vedic rites. Mukunda and Balabhadra Ata were executed under royal orders for their non-conformist views. Even Vamshigopaldev, their preceptor who held more conservative views on such matters, had his monastery burnt and was forced to go underground for many years. Another extremist, Nityanandadev of the Mognara Satra, was executed in 1650, on charges of non-conformism.¹⁹ However, it was this non-conformism that attracted the tribal population towards the movement, for it suited their liberal ways of life. Under the twin impact of neo-vaishnavism and tribalism, a further development and proliferation of castes, by way of fission, was arrested. For example, the Kalita caste which tended to split into several functional castes (nat, mali, kumār, kanhār, kanār etc.) was able, in the long run, to resist such a fission.

Sanskritisation of the tribal and Ahom societies and the growing religious conflicts of the seventeenth century warranted the formulation of an official religious policy. Himself a non-Hindu, Pratap Singha started patronising brahmans and Hindu temples with grants of waste-lands and serfs. The neo-vaishnavite monasteries were initially excluded from such favours. Later some of them, too, began to receive royal patronage while the persecution of other monasteries continued. The abbots of four Kāla-Samhati Satras - Moamara, Makajan, Dihing (Bahbari/Silikhatal) and Sesamukh - were, e.g., arrested around 1673. A palace coup, engineered by an influential disciple of one of these Satras, however, helped them escape unhurt.²⁰ Persecution was most indiscriminate during the last half of the reign of Gadadhar Singha (1681-96). At first he forcibly dispersed all married monks from their respective monasteries. Later, all these monasteries were burnt and their properties confiscated. Monks not belonging to the four higher castes (brahman, daivajna, kayastha and kalita) were condemned to hard labour on construction sites. The shudra abbots and leading members of a number of Kāla-Samhati satras, including Vaikunthanathdev of Moamara, were executed in 1691. These punitive measures were taken, as all religious preceptors and monks used to claim exemption from their universal militia obligations.²¹

Repression drove the neo-vaishnavite movement underground rather than cause its collapse. Hence, the State was forced to revise its religious policy early in Rudra Singha's (1696-1714) reign. He rehabilitated the persecuted monasteries. A conference of neo-vaishnavite preachers, held under his orders at the capital in 1702, decided against spiritual initiation of brahmans by shudra preceptors. The shudra preceptors who had argued against the decision were all forced to hang small earthen jars around their necks, as a mark of admonishment. Four of them belonging to the Kāla-Samhati Order were, amidst others, forced

to shift their headquarters to new places. A royal order was proclaimed forbidding henceforth the acceptance of brahman disciples by shudra preceptors. Later Chaturbhuja, the abbot of Sesamukh Satra (belonging to the Kāla-Samhati) then living at Moamara under royal orders, was punished on charges of admitting two brahman disciples. Two shudra abbots of Nika-Samhati monasteries were also forcibly expelled from their respective establishments for refusing idol-worship.²²

Rudra Simha prepared a register of recognised monasteries and appointed an officer for their supervision. Meanwhile, the Shakti cult of the Bengal school was found by him to suit the ruling class best. In accordance with his last wishes, his son King Shiva Sinha (1714-1744) was formally initiated to this cult in 1714.²³ Thus, the Ahom religious policy finally anchored on an alliance between the monarch, the Shakti worshippers and the brahmanical sections of the neo-vaishnavites. This policy was largely guided by political considerations. It aimed at and succeeded in driving a wedge between the brahminical and other elements within the neo-vaishnavite movement. Under royal patronage, a number of conformist monasteries emerged as big landed proprietors. They had hundreds of slaves, serfs and tenants on their estates, and they were exempted from all tax obligations to the State.²⁴

The Ahoms had built-in social inequality in their own society where one's position was largely determined by birth and where the highest state officials had to be recruited exclusively from the seven families (sāt-ghar) constituting the Ahom nobility. This was why the Ahom nobility, from the very beginning, held the social gap that existed within the Assamese Hindu society as legitimate. They even made a common cause with the brahmins against the non-conformism of neo-vaishnavism, since it tended to promote an egalitarian social outlook. The need

for an alliance with a section of the neo-vaishnavite movement arose gradually as the feudal class expanded in space and hierarchy. It materialised when the movement had already lost much of its early idealism. The right wing of the movement allied itself with the ruling class, while the left wing, represented by the Kāla-Samhati Order, by and large, long stuck to the democratic content of the ideology. Finally, during the feudal crisis that followed, only the Moamara Satra of the aforesaid Order amongst them boldly continued to uphold its protestant ideology.

The ruling feudal class was constituted of three distinct groups - (i) the traditional Ahom nobility (gohain) (ii) the spiritual lords (prabhu), i.e., priests and abbots some of whom were non-brahmans and (iii) the hereditary vassal chiefs. All of them including the King had agricultural farms cultivated by serfs and slaves. The militia, divided into a number of divisions, consisted of all adult male members (15-60 age group) excepting slaves, serfs and privileged persons of noble birth. Members of the militia received tax-free strips of wet-rice land from the community on a tenural basis. Militia divisions were two-fold - (i) kamri paik units providing ordinary soldiers-cum-labourers and (ii) chamuā paik units providing non-manual services. Customarily, one-fourth of the strength of a unit was always on public service through a system of rotation. In other words, a group of four militiamen, between them, provided one man-year of service to the State. When one was on militia duty, his farm and family were looked after by the other three members of his group, his co-villagers. In an emergency, the levy used to be temporarily increased to one-half of the strength of a unit on an ad hoc basis, and even upto two-thirds, depending upon the season and at great risks to the economy. The members of the non-manual service wing had to contribute a share of their products to the state if they were artisans, or they contributed specialised services in

accordance with their respective skills. Junior officers in charge of units of twenty, hundred and thousand enjoyed the status of chamua paiks. Senior officers were recruited from the nobility. The militia was engaged not only in defence activities, but also in the construction of public works, such as, roads, dams, temples and palaces. They also worked on royal farms.²⁵

In lieu of salary, the officers of different categories were allowed the usufruct of large tracts of lands and stipulated portions of, at least, an estimated 25 per cent of the mobilized paiks set aside as their temporary servitors (likchow).²⁶ The latter were deployed to work for officers to whom they were allotted. But they often had their obligations commuted by those officers for a payment in kind; or in cash, after money circulation had made some inroads into the natural economy. For the unpaid labour extracted from temporary serfs could not be very productive. Slaves and bondsmen suited them better. Even when slaves were employed, production was not organised on a large-scale basis, because of limitations of technical knowledge. The form in which slave labour was economically exploited pertained to the pure form of serfdom or tenancy.

This system of surplus extraction for the maintenance of the State and the nobility exhibited a certain degree of centralisation. In Assam, the king as the representative of the community, gradually established his claim to theoretical ownership of all communal wet-rice lands and waste-lands. On the other hand, homestead land developed clearly as tax-free private property of those in possession. Besides, feudal landed properties were also created by way of royal grants of waste-land tracts on which slaves and serfs were settled. But, in terms of acreage or population, this last form was not yet the major one, though

its domination over the whole system was indisputable. In any case, the State controlled the distribution of communal wet-rice lands cultivated by the peasantry; it organised the mobilisation of the surplus in the form of a central labour pool; and it finally redistributed this surplus amongst the various elements of the ruling class. The system thus increasingly assumed a form of a centralised feudalism (if one could use the term in a qualified sense) since the seventeenth century.²⁷

Perpetually assigned with huge grants of tax-free waste lands and portions of the paik population to cultivate these lands, the favoured brahmans, abbots of monasteries and temple priests constituted a class of spiritual lords, who exacted labour-rent in general or a rent in cash or kind in lieu of it from their tenants. These spiritual lords owed no military or fiscal obligation on a regular basis to the State.

Lastly, several hereditary vassal chiefs, all of tribal origin, were allowed to enjoy autonomy over their respective territories (desh) and subjects, subject to an obligation to supply a fixed contingent of soldiers to the Ahom king. The precise term for this kind of vassalage was sthāpit-sanchit (established and protected). Yet another term, sevakatā or Sevā (service) came into vogue to denote this relationship.

The centralisation of the feudal system was limited not only by vassalage but also by tribalism and kinship ties. The chain of authority from the King-in-Council down to the lowest officer - a captain of twenty - had its loose ends. The unit of twenty, linked with a supply base of eighty adult males (later sixty) was headed by the group's natural leader - the headman of their village or clan. S.K. Bhuyan rightly suggests that not only the units of twenty, but also of a hundred and of a thousand, were placed under command of such officers

as were acceptable to those commanded. There were cases when such junior officers had to be removed from their command whenever the ranks so demanded.²⁸ This indicates that the rural folk still retained some elements of the popular control they once had over the militia in its early phase. At the higher level of the command, too, the kinship ties had an accepted customary role in maintaining the balance of power between ~~the~~ ^{other} 'great' families. Three of the provincial governors had to be appointed customarily from the royal family, and other governors respectively from the 'great' families. Their inter-relations, subject to an oath of allegiance to the king, maintained the balance at the apex of the power structure. If the three great counsellors could combine, they had the customary right to depose the king and nominate another from the royal clan. Thus, the militia and the bureaucratic crust at the top still betrayed its original tribal character to a considerable extent.²⁹ The lingering semi-tribal, semi-feudal nature of the state - itself a reflection of the meagreness of the available quantum of surplus - headed towards a crisis even before its anti-tribal task was completed. The superimposed centralisation was somewhat tenuous. The unresolved contradiction between feudal and tribal elements within the militia was one important factor in the civil war between the rulers and the ruled, in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The other and more important factor contributing to the crisis was the inroads of money into the natural economy. ~~since the introduction of the~~ ~~contract~~ The revenue settlement introduced in Kamrup under the Mughals had encouraged the peasants to pay their land tax in cash, rather than in kind or labour service. This system was retained there with minimal modification, even after the final incorporation of Kamrup into the Ahom Kingdom by 1682. On the Mughal model, a land survey and settlement for the whole kingdom was completed during the years 1681-1751.

Militiamen (paiks) continued to enjoy tax-free wet-rice lands to the extent of about three acres per head in the rest of the Ahom Kingdom as before. However, it was no longer possible for them in the new situation to conceal the excess wet lands in their possession for which they were now supposed to pay a money tax.³⁰ For, the availability of land records and a trained survey staff after the 1680s gradually enabled the State to squeeze the defaulters. This had repercussions on the discipline of the militia. For example, with a view to forestalling the new rent-roll, four thousand paiks of Darrang staged a long march for protest demonstration in the Ahom capital in 1770. The king had to cancel the unpopular settlement, then and there.³¹

Yet another form of protest was the large-scale evasion of paik services. Despite census of manpower from time to time, a considerable number of the eligible adult population took advantage of the weak machinery of the State in not getting their names entered on the paik register. One convenient form of evasion was to join a monastery as a householder monk. The customary exemption of religious functionaries and monks from paik service encouraged thousands to join the monasteries as monks and, thus, claim such exemption. Monasteries in remote places, with abundant wastelands all around them for raising a crop of dry-rice, served as ideal places of refuge for disaffected paiks who were ready to leave their wet-rice plots with a view to evade their militia obligation. Since homestead plots and dry-rice fields, reclaimed from wastelands at personal initiative, were customarily tax-free, the monasteries played a colonising role in attracting peasant settlers in new areas.³²

Once money had infiltrated into the natural economy on a modest scale, those chanua and kanri paiks who belonged to high castes and superior birth were generally allowed commutation of their obligations to the State for a money-tax. Being so privileged, they were then

designated as a-paikān chamuā. Thus, in the Ahom Kingdom, there emerged five broad social status-groups - (i) the nobility - temporal and spiritual - who did not pay any taxes for the lands and estates they held and had their cultivation carried on mainly by serfs, tenants and slaves; (ii) the a-paikān chamuā - the gentry as well as the exempted peasants and artisans who paid only a money-tax; (iii) paikān chamuā, i.e. artisans, literati and skilled people who were exempted from manual labour but had to pay taxes in kind or specialised service; (iv) peasants subjugated to manual labour ^{/device} for the benefit of the State and its officers and (v) the servile population consisting of slaves, bondsmen and ^{private} serfs whose status differed only slightly from each other. Of the five social status-groups, the most numerous were those of the fourth category. Not land-holding as such but the number of ploughs and draught animals owned was the measure of the well-being of a peasant household. A rich peasant operated on the basis of a large unit and, in some cases, also one or two bondsmen. Broadly, these five status-groups could be reduced to three social classes - (i) the feudal lords, (ii) the free peasantry and peasant-cum-artisans, subjugated only to the State, and (iii) the servile population, subjugated not to the State, but personally to the King and other feudal lords.

By the eighteenth century, the money element in the revenue collection had increased considerably by earlier and local standards, and ^{/this} not without reasons. There was an organised internal market in betel nuts and leaves. Expanded external trade relations had meanwhile led to an increasing exchange of the region's elephants, aloe wood, pepper, long pepper, musk, spikenard, mustard-seeds, gold, silk etc. for salt, saltpetre, sulphur and luxury cotton cloth from Mughal India. There was a concomitant growth of a chain of foothills markets. Assamese traders procured forest products from the surrounding hills in

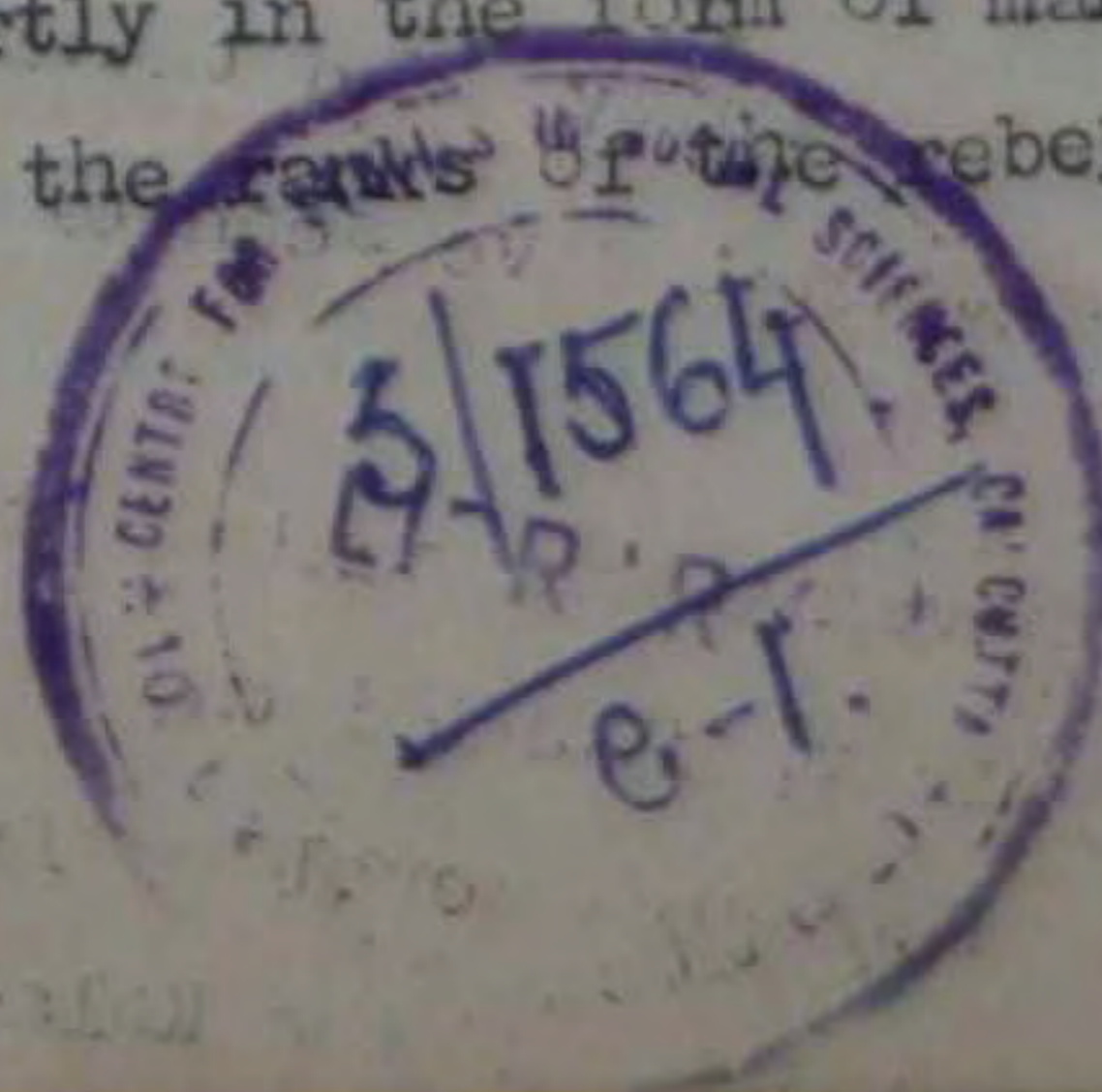
exchange of rice, dried fish, silk and cotton cloth in these marts for re-export to Mughal India. The resultant increase in economic activities led to some degree of specialisation, particularly in Kamrup, where artisan castes began to attain their functional importance on the north-Indiaⁿ model. Sualkuchi, Ramdia and Sarthebari in Kamrup developed as centres for silk-weaving, oil-crushing and bell-metal casting, respectively.³³ Skilled artisans were encouraged to migrate to and were systematically settled in western Assam. From the closing decade of the seventeenth century, the Ahom mint "was constantly at work and small coins weighing 48 and 24 ratis respectively were issued", followed by still smaller coins, weighing 16, 12 and 3 ratis and a regular gold currency in the eighteenth century.³⁴ The increase in the supply of currency clearly indicated a growing market.

Under the circumstances, better-off peasants and artisans had by now some command over a ready cash. Naturally they looked forward to commutation of their corvee obligation for a money tax (in case such taxes could not be got rid of altogether) and to entry into the superior chamua status. There were no jejmari relations-based nucleated 'village communities' in the Ahom Kingdom. Artisan crafts, even petty trading activities, were generally combined with agriculture in the same peasant homes. Even functional castes - there were only a few - were involved also in agriculture. Further development towards specialisation needed freedom of movement including occupational mobility on the part of the peasant-artisans and peasant-traders. But this was lacking under the compulsions of their periodic service obligations. Commutation of service, or of payments in kind, for a reasonably low money-tax would have helped solve this problem. However, since the functioning of the State apparatus was dependent on the militia system, the rulers could meet this general craving for an upward mobility only upto a point - to

the extent the State was in need of a money revenue. It was reluctant to extend this privilege to new people other than those belonging to the higher castes. It also pitched the money-tax high.

The conflict on the question of both form and quantum of rent payments between the ruling class and the subjugated people consisting of the peasants, artisans and traders emerged as a major contradiction of the eighteenth-century Assamese society. The centralised extraction of surplus and its redistribution amongst the competing groups of the ruling class faced a crisis with the sharpening of this contradiction. Even the nobility, temporal (mostly Ahom) as well as spiritual (mostly brahman), was ridden with in-fights. The perpetual grant of thousands of acres of tax-free land to the latter as devottar, dharmottar and brahmottar estates on considerations of winning new allies, was detested by the temporal nobility.³⁵ It was under such circumstances that the social protest movement was transformed into an armed conflict, under the leadership of ~~the~~ ^{the} extremists amongst the neo-vaishnavites.

Within the subjugated peasantry, the most discontented were the Dafla-Bahatiyās and the Morans, on special grounds of their own. The former were foothills dwellers, assigned with certain obligations to hillmen coming down from the Arunachal hills into the plains every winter. The responsibility of paying an annual subsidy (posa), committed by the Ahom government to the hillmen, devolved on these Bahatiyas over and above their standing obligation to the State, reduced on this consideration to one-third of the usual norm. The total burden however turned out to be heavier than the norm, since they paid their dues partly in kind and cash and partly in the form of manual labour.³⁶ No surprise that they would join the ranks of the rebels in due course.



The Morans, a plains tribe, were migratory slash-and-burn cultivators in the sparsely-populated tracts lying north of the Burhi Dihing river. The early Ahom migrants established close contacts with the southern section of this tribe. In due course, these Morans, living south of the Dibru river, underwent a process of Ahomisation and, later, of sanskritisation. As a result, many of them had gradually adopted the plough and wet-rice cultivation. A few were even adopted into respectable Ahom clans. A number of farms were worked by Moran serfs for the Ahom nobility. A portion of the Moran population was also shifted to the Ahom habitat. Thus the southern Morans became relatively integrated with the Ahom society and territory.³⁷ But the forest-dwelling Morans, mostly living north of the Dibru river and at a distance from the Brahmaputra, were virtually left undisturbed in their habitat, which was only nominally under Ahom rule. Their obligation to the State was limited to supplying, in lieu of militia service, a variety of products, such as, elephants, fuel, ivory, honey, bamboo-mats, raw cotton and vegetable dyes. Both sections of the people adhered to the Moamaria Vaishnava faith. Their main crops were ahu (dry rice), sugarcane and cotton.³⁸ Both the northern and southern Morans (upper and lower Matakas) long retained their independent spirit. They were described by one British officer in 1839 as "a rude, fanatical, stiff-necked people, accustomed to a very light assessment and who have always exercised considerable share in their own Government ... there exists a greater spirit of equality in the community, and their chiefs exercise less authority over the people than I have seen elsewhere in Assam".³⁹

It was in early seventeenth century that Aniruddhadev, a Kayastha disciple of Gopaldev, founded the Moamara Satra in Upper Assam. Since then the office of the Guru devolved from father to son in the same lineage. Like other Satras of the Kāla-Samhati Order, the Moamara Satra, too, did not worship idols. Nor did it recognise the supremacy

of brahmans in the spiritual sphere. Though denied now by its present-day heads, apparently the Satra had held very liberal views in the past in regard to commensality and connubium. It also appears to have taken a lenient view of certain secret cults, practised in total defiance of caste and sex taboos. Those cults were a legacy of the suppressed Tantric tradition that died hard amongst the people of Assam.⁴⁰ The guru was identified with Godhead and his authority was supposed to be supreme. Nevertheless the Satra fraternity built a democratic and egalitarian tradition that suited the tribal way of life.⁴¹ That is why the teachings of the Satra attracted the Morans. They all became disciples of the Satra by the mid-18th century.

The Moamara Satra had a large following among all sections of the people including Ahoms and brahmans. But its close association with the despised Morans, untouchable fishermen and men of other depressed castes was widely noted with alarm by the contemporary conservative circles.⁴² Not only that the Satra was denied royal patronage, it was also repeatedly persecuted. Nevertheless it continued to function and preach amongst the people through a network of village-based tithe collectors, designated as gaon-burha (village elders). At the time of the uprisings, there were reportedly seven such pontiffs, headed by a Bar-gaonburha or chief elder.

On the eve of the civil war, the Morans had their tribal economy and organisation still basically intact in the region, north of the Dibru river. Any super-imposed authority, whether that of the Ahom State or that of the Moamaria Guru, could function only through their own tribal organisation. Neither the royal nor the religious authority over them was in practice absolute. In course of their revolts against the State, there were many occasions when they even flouted the advice of their

Guru, whose authority in theory was said to be subject to none. Any explanation of the tenacity of the revolts in terms of blind obedience to the successive Gurus is therefore untenable. The causes were deeper and were inherent in the socio-economic situation.

II

The Period of Civil War

Conditions of peace, internal order and relative prosperity for several decades before and during the reign of Rajeswar Simha (1751-69) suggest also a rising population. It reached, presumably, its heretofore highest level - an estimated three million or so - on the eve of the civil war. Nevertheless, the signs of a deepening crisis were already there in the body politic. Never before was the ruling class so sharply divided as then by sectarian disputes. There were too many claimants to the limited number of offices. The militia could no longer be effectively mobilised and commanded. For the first time in the annals of the kingdom, several high officers had to be punished one after another for refusing to go on active service on the plea of ill health. An expedition sent in aid of the King of Manipur perished on its way in inhospitable forests because of the state of things. That the militia was facing a man-power crisis despite a rising population was obvious from Rajeswar Simha's new order that required three paiks, instead of four, to complete between them one man-year of service to the State. This increased the period of obligatory service from three months to four months per paik - a 33 per cent increase in the load that must have been detested by the common man.⁴³

The widening gap between the population and the effective man-power supply was the cumulative result of a prolonged process of three

types of leakages - (i) the alienation of portions of the paik population to an increasing number of devottar, dharmottar and brahmottar grantees during the eighteenth century, (ii) the increasing commutation of paik service for a money-tax under compelling circumstances and (iii) an increasing evasion of obligatory service by the remaining paiks under conditions of land-abundance and proliferation of neo-vaishnavite Satras in remote and desolate areas, as explained above.

The growing strength of the monasteries, particularly of the non-conformist ones drawing resources from voluntary contributions, contrasted sharply with the visible decadence of the State apparatus. The Moamara Satra, e.g., had reportedly ten to twelve agricultural farms, four to five thousand buffaloes, substantial quantities of gold and silver, eight to ten thousand servile dependants and a following of ten to twelve thousand monks. The number of its lay disciples ran into a few lakhs.⁴⁴ After prolonged persecution and humiliations for over a century, the Satra found the times most opportune at last to demonstrate its power, under the leadership of its abbet, Astabhujadev (d. 1770).

The opportunity was provided by the Guru's decision to establish a new campus at Khutiapota in the Maloupathar - an extensive, undulating plain, swampy and partly forested, which served the neighbourhood as fishing, hunting and grazing grounds. Thousands of devotees worked for five days to raise a mound there for housing the Satra. This demonstration of man-power unnerved the State authorities. Misunderstanding between them and the Satra widened; and, on several occasions, the functionaries of the Satra were publicly insulted. No longer ready to lie low, the latter began to spread disaffection secretly amongst the people. The Government was also not sitting idle. It won over to its side the influential Dihing Satra, also of the Kāla-Samhati under, to counter-act the influence of the Moamarias.⁴⁵

The First Phase of Revolts

Open conflict however broke out after Rajeswar's death when Ragh Neog, a leading Moran disciple of the Satra, was flogged on 15 September 1769 for alleged short supply of elephants in fulfilment of the feudal dues. In November 1769, the Morans raised the standard of revolt with open support from the Satra. They won over three exiled Ahom princes to their side by diplomatic manoeuvres with the promise of the throne to each of them. Virtually prisoners in their hands, the three princes were used as show-pieces to bring dissensions in the enemy camp. Led by Ragh Neog, Naharkhora Saikia (also a Moran), his two wives - Radha and Rukmini, Govinda Gaonburha and Began Deka, the rebel forces inflicted defeat upon defeat on the royalist troops and liberated the entire territory, north of the Burhi Dihing river. Compared to the royalists, they were ill-armed, many carrying only allegedly charmed bamboo-sticks. Their strength however lay in the intelligence they received, the guerilla tactics they adopted and the sympathies they roused amongst the common paiks of the royalist camp.⁴⁶ King Lakshmi Sinha (1769-1780) was told after a series of defeats by one of the Ahom nobles :

"I have found that the attitude and feelings of our people have assumed a dangerous shape. These who are sent to the war submit themselves to the Morans, while others desert the field"⁴⁷

On another occasion, an Ahom noble was reported to have said, "The fishermen as well as their religious head have no sense of right or wrong. They are sure to attack the royal boats, plunder the goods and assault the occupants".⁴⁸ Even amongst the palace attendants in the capital, there were people who regularly leaked out secret information to the rebel camp.⁴⁹ Under these favourable circumstances, the rebels advanced and occupied the capital which remained in their hands for about five

months, from 21 November 1769 to 11 April 1770.

Once sure of victory, the rebels liquidated the three Ahom princes who were with them and declared Ramananda, son of Nahorkhora, as the king. New coins were struck in his name. The deposed king fled the capital, but was soon brought back as a prisoner. Administration was cleansed of the nobles. All offices of importance, so long held by blue-blooded Ahom nobles alone, were thrown open to the commoners. Three Morans were chosen for the offices of the three Great Counsellors. Ragh was installed as the Barbarua and two ordinary Ahoms as governors of Sadiya and Marangi, respectively. Similarly, new men were installed in

other key posts excepting one in which the incumbent was retained. An ordinary kanri-paik of the Ahom village of Kalugaon was sent to Gauhati as the Barphukan, i.e. the governor and viceroy for western Assam. Rukmini, one of the two women leaders of the revolt, was also sent to Gauhati to help the new governor. The deposed officials of the erstwhile regime were executed. Thus, the seizure of power was complete. The entire influence of the Moamaria Satra was thrown on the side of the rebels. Their leaders went to Khutiapota, the headquarters of the Satra in Maloupathar, to pay homage to the Moamaria Guru. The abbots of the four great monasteries of the Brahma-Sanhati Order as well as other monasteries were forced to contribute large sums of money and pay homage, under severe penalty, to the Guru of the Moamara Satra. For months, thousands were daily administered sharana by the Moamaria Guru through a simplified ceremony.⁵⁰

Evidently the peasant insurgents had an immense hatred to privileges based on birth; but in the absence of a revolutionary programme, they could not think beyond putting new wine in the old bottle. Their desire for social equality and a liberal administration did not fit into

the feudal state apparatus they wielded. Men who led them came from the upper stratum of a trans-tribal peasant society, that was already exposed to a process of differentiation. Some of the leaders came from the Ahomised section of the Moran tribe, and they had held junior officer's ranks (Neog, Saikia etc.) under the old regime. Hence, once installed in the high offices, they tried to ape the erstwhile Ahom officers in their behaviour pattern. Ragh seized wives and daughters of many Ahom nobles and kept them in his harem.⁵¹ In fact, as the new Barbarua, he demonstratively coveted for all the symbols of power and privilege the Ahom nobles had till then exercised. The Guru of the Moamarias, who was the de facto owner of the huge properties of their Satra, pleaded for a compromise with the traditional nobility.⁵² But nobody listened to him. A section of the Moamarias were not satisfied with a mere change of government. Headed by Bayan Deka and Govinda Gaonbura, they left the capital in disgust and set up their headquarters at Sagunmuri. With bamboo-sticks in their hands, they roamed about the countryside, singing rousing mystic songs of which only some obscure fragments have survived. "Oh people : time is out of joint, hold your sticks ready" appears to have been the refrain of one of the songs they sang.⁵³

The rebels had turned the old land revenue-cum-militia system upside down. But meanwhile the surviving nobility took full advantage of the dissensions in the rebel camp. A coup was planned in a secret meeting, in which an ex-queen in Ragh's harem took the leading part. The royalists assassinated Ragh in his harem on 11 April and reoccupied the capital. The defeat of the insurrection of 1770 was followed by a general massacre of the Moamarias all over the country. Amongst thousands killed in action, or executed later, were Ramananda whom the rebels had set up on the throne, Naharkhera, Radha, Rukmini, Astabhujade and his son Saptabhuj. After the restoration, a Sanskrit drama, written

by a court pundit, was staged to celebrate the victory. In this drama the pundit, true to his salt, characterised the civil war as a war between forces for and against religion. The forces of Shaivism, Shaktism and Vaishnavism were shown to be on the side of the royal camp while all sorts of bandits and "slaughterers of cows, brahmans and children", on the side of the Morans. Characters representing the insurgent leaders were vulgarised in this drama.⁵⁴

The Moamaria forces were liquidated as quickly as they had come to power. However, those at Sagumuri under Govinda Gaonburha's command resisted heroically for a while, but were finally defeated. Govinda was pursued and killed. Yet another group of Moran peasants in the interior led by Lephera, Paramananda, Obhotanuniya, and Tanganram held out for about eight months. Finally, they too were completely routed. The survivors were resettled in new villages.⁵⁵ Thus the first revolt came to an end within one and a half years, but the discontent persisted and spread in new areas, where the religious influence of the Moamara Satra was minimal. The protest demonstration in the capital against the land settlement by four thousand paiks from Darrang in 1770 has already been mentioned.

The Second Phase : Foreign Intervention

The Moamarias, who had been lying low for more than a decade, raised once more their standard of open revolt in April 1783. An armed group of them launched a daring surprise attack on the twin capitals of Gargaon and Rangpur, but were repulsed after a heavy hand-to-hand fight. A general massacre of the Moamarias throughout the kingdom followed, and it continued for one month and a half. "The waters of the rivers could not be drunk and people could not walk along the roads. Even the water and the fish of the Brahmaputra" writes a chronicler in 1838 "became

tainted with the stinking smell of corpses. Half the country was depopulated".⁵⁶ Thereafter the kingdom was apparently in peace, but only for a few years.

The years 1786-94 once more witnessed sustained people's uprisings on a scale unprecedented both in terms of their sweep and grip. The Morans, north of the Dibra river, rose in revolt under the leadership of Badal Gaonburha. A people's army consisting of the Moamarias and Dafla-Bahatias was successfully raised by Harihar Tanti at Japaribhita, a foothills village on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The Morans of Rangdoichong revolted. A contingent of the rebels freed Pitambar, a grandson of the late Moamaria Guru, from the custody of the Auniati Satra.⁵⁷ Pitambar allegedly performed the Brahmaghna (brahman-slaying) sacrifice. The Moamarias then occupied the river island of Majuli. They set on fire the monasteries of Garmur, Dakhinpat and Auniati - all of the Brahma-Samhati headed by brahman abbots.⁵⁸ Later the abbots of Bareghar Satra and Budhbari Satra - both of Kala-Samhati - were executed, presumably for their collaboration with the royal side.⁵⁹ The rebels went on taking village after village until they finally encircled the royal city of Rangpur.

The royal forces were defeated at the important battles of Sagunmuri and Bhatiapar. In another battle, the forces led by the vassal chiefs of Rani, Luki, and Topakuchi were routed. So critical was the situation that hundreds of monks of Garmur and Dihing Satras, and even the Ahom priests, had to take up arms in defence of the tottering regime. On 19 January 1788, the king and the inhabitants fled the capital. The evacuated city was taken by the Moamarias, and it remained in their hands for the next five years. The concerted rebel operations were guided by ordinary people like Harihar Tanti, Kalia Bhomora, Bidur, Howha, Tamai,

Paráad, Phophai, Bharat and Sarbananda.⁶⁰ Bharat was a distant relation of the late Moamaria Guru in the male line, while Sarbananda was a Matak of Chutiya origin.

No attempt was however made ~~to~~ ^{at this time} to establish a centralised rebel administration over the liberated areas. Harihar Tanti ruled over a large tract on the north bank of the Brahmaputra and his lieutenant Howha in the 500 sq.-mile river island of Majuli. Sarbananda was elected a Raja in the Moran habitat, with his headquarters at Bengmara (present Tinsukia). Bharat was installed as the king in the capital, Bharat till 1797, and Sarbananda till 1795, regularly struck coins in their own respective names - a measure of the stability of their rule. In that confusion, Sadiya was occupied by the Khamti tribe which had recently migrated into that area from Upper Burma.⁶¹

The defeated royalist forces ~~tried~~ to regroup themselves in the territory south of the Ladoi-Gar Road under the personal leadership of their prime minister. But no vestige of discipline was any more left there in the remnants of the once-powerful militia. "Fighting with these same archers and shieldsmen our kings had vanquished even the foreigners on numerous occasions, but the very same archers", lamented an Ahom noble "become demoralised and terrified at the mere sight of the Moamarias and take to their heels".⁶² When the local division of the militia of Bacha, largely composed of Kacharies, was summoned in April 1789 by the prime minister, they refused to take up arms against the Moamarias. Battle-razed upper Assam was haunted by a famine - the severest in Assam's history. The prime minister initially succeeded in suppressing sporadic revolts at Bacha as well as the trans-Janji area and finally in blocking the south-westward thrust of the Moamarias. But he, too, had to retreat for a while from his stronghold at Jorhat.⁶³

Many of the uprooted Ahom nobles had taken shelter in the districts of Darrang and Nowgong. Having their agricultural farms established there, these fugitive nobles forced the local inhabitants to work for them. They even plundered the latter's grain stores and orchards and molested their women. This resulted in the outburst of popular discontent in both the districts'. Led by Sindhura Hajarika, the people of Nowgong besieged the fugitive King's quarters in 1791 when he was camping there, and ~~for~~ ^{they} forced him to change his local officers. The discontent ^{also} spread among the royal forces, then stationed near Biswanath and Kaliabar. They sided with the local Moamaris. As the situation proved too hot for him, the King had to quit Nowgong for Gauhati finally on 11 June 1792.⁶⁴ Nominally under a vassal Raja, Darrang was long an integral part of the Ahom territory and had the obligation of manning a 6000-strong militia post at Gauhati. In the chaos that had set in, two hundred and forty village heads of the principality of Darrang conferred together and took a vow of non-cooperation with the King. They recalled their men and their two princes from Gauhati. The summons were readily obeyed. This revolt of the Darrang people was led by Mainapowa, Kalia, Swarup, Bhotar Konwar and Phatik Hajarika.⁶⁵

In Kamrup, the Moamaria influence was minimal. The uprising of a few hundred fishermen there, led by a 'low-born' Ahom named Haidhan and one Boragi, was perhaps the only action which might be cited as an instance of this influence. They marched on Gauhati and occupied it on 18 November 1792, after the king had deserted it the previous night.⁶⁶ In Kamrup, and to some extent in Darrang, anti-government feelings were high partly because of ethnic reasons. Once subjects of the Koch Kingdom, the local people looked upon the Ahoms as their conquerors. Under Ahom rule, there were precautionary restrictions on the entry of men of Kamrup and Darrang into the towns of Rangpur and Gauhati. Hence,

the revolts of Haradatta Chaudhuri, a powerful landlord of North Kamrup, and Krishnanarayan, Rajah of Darrang, had some degree of popular support in Kamrup. Yet they had to hire a large number of mercenary Bengal Burkandazes to oust the Ahom king from Kamrup. The initiative in carrying forward the revolt thus passed from the hands of the common people to oppressive local feudal elements and brigands. Krishnanarayan came to terms with his sovereign by 1793, as the latter agreed through the mediation of Captain Welsh to commute the obligation to supply 6000 paiks for a **tribute**. Neither any local monastery nor the bulk of the peasantry were apparently involved in the Kamrup uprising. Haradatta's rebellion was suppressed in 1796.⁶⁷ Phatik Hazarika took shelter in the Bhutan hills as an outlaw and continued to carry on brigandage from there.

During the trying years of 1786-94, it became increasingly clear to the royal camp that the age-old militia, now reduced to a rabble, could no more function as an effective organ of coercion. A few hundred Bengal Burkandazes were recruited to enhance the fighting power. Military help from the neighbouring Kingdoms of Manipur and Nora (in Upper Burma) was sought for and received. But, despite those reinforcements, the royal forces failed to improve their prospects. The attack of the Manipur contingent on Rangpur, e.g., was easily repulsed in 1792 by Bharat's Moamaria forces led by his peasant commanders - Tuburi, Mekheli, Takachh, Khagun, Meghai and Kalidhan.⁶⁸ It was not before the participation of East India Company's troops in the civil war during the period from November 1792 to May 1794, that the situation turned in favour of the royalists.

Captain Thomas Welsh entered Assam with an expeditionary force of 550 men only. Despite the superiority of its arms, this small force would have perhaps met with a disaster had the rebel forces been

well-organised. Obviously, they were not. Like all inexperienced peasant revolts pre-dating the birth of a capitalist class, the Moamaria revolts, too, failed to consolidate their early gains. They had no alternative to offer to the feudal regime they destroyed in upper Assam. Welsh's troops occupied Gauhati without ^{facing} any resistance, on 24 November 1792 and, after a few encounters with the Moamarias, restored Rangpur to Gaurinath Simha on 18 March 1794. It was not because of effective resistance but apparently because of a deliberate policy of 'wait and see' that Welsh took such a long time to reach the capital. In early May the Moamarias led by Bharat tried to retake the capital, but after several defeats in its suburbs, they dispersed. On 25 May the interventionist force left the capital to return to Bengal with their prize money in July 1794. But aid in the form of arms and ~~ammunitions~~ munitions to the Ahom King continued to flow in.⁶⁹

The Third Phase of Revolt

No respite was given to Kamaleswar Simha (1795-1811) for more than a decade. The Dafla-Bahatiyas and the Moamarias together kept up their resistance on the north bank until their leader Phophai died in action in 1796. No sooner were they suppressed than the Moamarias gave another battle at Chowkihat. The leader, Bharat, escaped. But his religious adviser, Pitambar, was captured; he died in captivity. The remnants of Bharat's forces, unitedly with the Singphos (a border tribe), gave yet another battle, but could not stand before the royalist troops. By then a small standing army, trained and organised on the British-Indian model and armed with flint guns, had been put into use by the royalists. Pursued into the forests, Bharat and his five associates died a gallant death in 1799. The dead body of Bharat was sent in a boat to the King, and it was later pinned aloft on a post in a resettled Moamaria village in Khutiapota to terrorise the people. The royalist forces then re-occupied Sadiya in 1800.⁷⁰

However, Sarbananda still continued to rule over the liberated area of Matak from its capital, Bengmara. Those who had taken refuge in the adjacent Kachari and Jaintia kingdoms also re-grouped themselves along the borders and persistently harassed the royalist villagers of Nowgong. Five companies of royalist sepoy, equipped with British arms and ammunitions, were sent to Matak and Nowgong to suppress the rebels. These troops were lured into the jungles by stratagem and were completely destroyed in 1802. All their arms and ammunitions fell into the rebel hands.⁷¹

The situation around the capital, which lay at a distance of barely three days' march from the rebel headquarters at Bengmara, was also tense. In 1803, about five hundred people belonging to the secret sect of night-worshippers (*rātikhōwā/aritiyā/ritiyā*) hatched a plot to rise in revolt. The leading conspirators, including one Panimuwa, were however apprehended in time and executed. A few neo-vaishnavite abbots were also suspected of involvement in the sect's unlawful activities. Found guilty of complicity, the brahman abbot of the Katanipar Satra (of the *Kāla-Samhati*) was banished from the kingdom. In the wake of the event, heads of all monasteries and their village representatives were warned against harbouring any night-worshipper. They were henceforth to pay a fine in case any night-worshipper was apprehended in village under their influence.⁷² In the following year, an alliance of rebellious Matak refugees and Kachari peasants in Nowgong having been defeated, a massacre of the Moamarias and their collaborators followed there in November. Some of the survivors were resettled in the Ahom territory, while others escaped into the adjacent kingdoms. The civil war in Nowgong eventually came to an end in 1805.⁷⁴

The standing army that was gradually built up with British help consisted, in due course, of eighteen companies of one hundred

sepoys in each - mostly immigrating Hindustanies to begin with.⁷⁵ Their pay having once fallen into arrears, the Government raised forced levies from all the monasteries - big and small - to avert the financial crisis.⁷⁶ Thus reorganised, the royalist forces invaded Matak - the last stronghold of the Moamaria rebels - once more in the winter of 1806.⁷⁷ Despite initial successes, they however failed to annex it. For the people there carried on a harassing mode of guerilla warfare. The struggle appears to have had terminated somewhat indecisively. The Matak reportedly agreed to pay an annual tribute in cash which was never paid. Instead they resumed their traditional obligation to pay in the shape of ivory, elephants etc.⁷⁸ Matak - ^aterritory of some 1800 square miles with its capital at Rangagara - continued to be ruled by Sarbananda whom the title of Barsenapati was conceded to, and after him by his son. It was subjugated by the British in 1826, and its final annexation to British India took place in 1842. The principal Satra of the Moamarias ~~had~~ ^{meanwhile been} allowed by the Ahom King to be shifted to the interior of the Matak principality.

Results of the Civil War

About one half of the population of the Ahom Kingdom perished and the economy was totally disrupted. Both parties in the civil war were ruined. No alternative to the feudal system did emerge, since no new ruling class could germinate from the relatively less differentiated peasantry and its under-developed stratum of trader and artisan elements. The issues in dispute got blurred under the impact of the mixed motivations, since diverse and nebulous class elements had joined the standard of rebellion with varying degrees of dislike for the regime.

Nevertheless one positive outcome of the civil war was the realisation that the ruling class could no more rule in the old manner.

77 However, Sarbananda still continued to rule over the liberated area of Matak from its capital, Bengmara. Those who had taken refuge in the adjacent Kachari and Jaintia kingdoms also re-grouped themselves along the borders and persistently harassed the royalist villagers of Nowgong. Five companies of royalist sepcoys, equipped with British arms and ammunitions, were sent to Matak and Nowgong to suppress the rebels. These troops were lured into the jungles by stratagem and were completely destroyed in 1802. All their arms and ammunitions fell into the rebel hands.⁷¹

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77
The Moamarias undermined the myth that only the blue-blooded Ahom had the right to rule. It was becoming increasingly difficult for the State to appoint all high officers from the aristocratic Ahom families alone. After the first Moamaria revolt, King Lakshmi Simha appointed an able man of the Kalita caste in 1772 to the military rank of a Phukan. Although this departure from the age-old custom created a commotion and led to the latter's fall, later many such departures were made by the subsequent kings. Two Ahom nobles, holding office as Great Counsellors, were even dismissed from their offices by Kamalesvar Simha, on the basis of complaints lodged by the paiks under their jurisdiction. Such action in favour of the paiks was unprecedented.⁷⁹

The other significant reform - a by-product of the civil war - was the formation of a regularly paid standing army on the British-Indian model. This had wider implications. The State now needed an increased money-revenue for regular payment of wages to the army. What else could be a better source of this revenue than ~~the~~ ^{large-scale} commutation of the paik services for a money tax? Indeed, a beginning appeared to have already been made in that direction at the instance of the British Government, when the Ahom Government agreed to receive an annual payment of Rs.50,000 from the principality of Darrang in lieu of the services of 6000 Paiks due to it. The obligations of the Raja of Beltola were also commuted. Later the paik services all over Assam were commuted for a money tax during the period of the Burmese occupation (1817-24). Surely, even without this intervention, the process of monetisation of the paik revenue and the liquidation of the unpaid militia would have been hastened by the very logic of the situation. For, the interests of the State and the peasantry had by then a common meeting-point. The latter was capable of producing a surplus however small, for the market and the former had need for a money revenue. In 1794 Welsh wishfully observed

that the "commutation of services would be acceptable to the peasantry".⁸⁰
But there were transitional problems.

The average peasant's incapacity to pay a money tax in a currency-short economy still remained the determining factor, however coveted the chamua status might be. A major section of the peasants, particularly tribal peasants, therefore appeared to have craving for a return to the tribal ways of life that were expected by them to ensure a greater measure of social equality and freedom. In liberated Matak, though a semblance of the Ahom feudal hierarchy was maintained, the government there was more loosely structured and the people lightly taxed. A section of the paiks were allowed to contribute their dues in kind or service as before, while others - particularly migrant settlers - paid in cash a light tax. As a result, a large number of Ahom subjects left their homes and settled permanently in Matak. They not only included Ahom and non-Ahom Moanarias but also disciples of monasteries belonging to the Brahma-Samhati.⁸¹ To the Morans and other Moanarias, autonomous Matak was a sanctuary where they could ^{reportedly} breathe freely. To that extent, tribalism re-asserted itself, but for a while.

III

Some Tentative Conclusions

This survey of the course of Assam's social history for three hundred years suggests that the emergence and popular acceptance of the neo-vaishnavite ideology coincided there with the period of the consolidation of early feudal formations - a process that was, to that extent, completed by the end of the seventeenth century. Like the developing feudalism, the neo-vaishnavite ideology too had a detribalising role. Its emphasis on one humane deity in place of many, and on one common language, as spoken by the majority, in place of several

tribal languages and Sanskrit, was helpful to the growth of an integrated, valley-wise feudal hierarchy, with a sovereign at its apex. Developing feudalism, at this higher stage, needed a universal faith that would uphold the concept of vassalage in the spiritual model and, at the same time, would have a popular appeal. Neo-vaishnavite faith and practice - the monasteries acquired feudal properties in due course - fulfilled this condition. That is why, despite occasional tensions in mutual relation, neo-vaishnavism emerged as the ideology of feudalism that permeated the arts, literature and religion of the period. At its height, it was able to absorb folk forms and elemental human values of the peasant culture, in order to rationalise the feudal class content with the wrapping of a popular and humane culture.

Detribalisation to a considerable extent having been achieved and sustained, feudalism headed towards a crisis in the late eighteenth century under two pressures : (1) the sharpening contradiction between the feudal class and the peasantry (the latter, a tribe-peasant continuum) and (2) the sharpening contradiction between different sections of the ruling class over shares of the appropriated surplus. This situation was also reflected within the sphere of neo-vaishnavism. No longer could it harmonise the interests of the exploiters and the exploited - class and folk elements of culture - within the same ideological mould. It split. Trading and artisan elements within the society had not developed adequately till the end of our period. They could hardly offer an alternative to the feudal system in the shape of a new progressive ideology. Hence there was a revival of some aspects of tribalism in the ideological sphere.

In the eighteenth century, the mainstream of neo-vaishnavism sided with the rulers. The Kala-Samhati school of vaishnavism, with

its emphasis on wider social equality and links with a tribal layer of consciousness, remained by and large with the people. But the neo-vaishnavite establishments including the Kāla-Samhati, on the whole, had meanwhile lost much of their early idealism and acquired vested interests in the feudal mode of production.⁸² On the eve of the outbreak of open hostilities, the head of the powerful Dihing Satra, which had, like the Moanara Satra, a large following amongst the untouchable castes, was won over to the royal side. Heads of other Kāla-Samhati Satras like Bareghar and Budhbari also appear to have followed suit. Only the Guru of the Moanara Satra refused to fall in line.

In the phase of the people's armed struggle against the regime, the Moanaria Guru faltered, and he pleaded for a compromise with the traditional rulers. But he was by-passed by his extremist followers. In this period, the legacy of neo-vaishnavism increasingly appeared as a fetter, rather than a useful weapon for the people in revolt.⁸³ During the phase of armed struggle, the peasant society - a tribe-peasant continuum - therefore solicited its spiritual inspiration and nourishment not from the classic form of neo-vaishnavism, but from the age-old magico-religious cult of night-worshippers, an admixture of tribal fertility rites and debased Tantricism, long driven underground. It had meanwhile been modified and humanised under the impact of the rising neo-vaishnavism. Thus, there was vigorous revival of the cult during the eighteenth century. The chronicles are full of references to the performance of magico-religious rites by the rebels. Understandably, the rebels used the secret nocturnal sessions also for fomenting discontent and hatching conspiracies, as the case of Panimuwā, referred to above in Part III, suggests.

The cult still survives in upper Assam amongst the same masses as were intensely involved in the Moamaria revolts. But so secret is its practice that scholars have heretofore failed to collect adequate data for a full investigation. The bare elements of the cult that have come to light clearly indicate its congregational and egalitarian forms and the urge for an escape from the rigours of the caste society into the millenium of primitive communism, vaguely cherished in the subconscious mind. An outline of the cult, divested of local variations and as practised about a hundred and fifty years ago, is given below, with a view to examine its relevance to the revolts under review.⁸⁴

Sect members concealed their cult identity and usually followed one of the neo-vaishnavite Satras, mostly of the Kāla-Samhati Order, in their daily life. From time to time, they assembled secretly at night. The cult was a queer combination of the principles of bhakti and mother-goddess worship. The sect members - both men and women - congregated to worship Vishnu through 'left-handed', Bacchanialism practices (vamāchāra). The entire ceremony had its focus on a woman symbolising ecstasy (rasa-vishishtā), known as bhakti-matr (Mother Devotion). She sat naked without any make-up in a vacant room. Milk was poured on her breasts and, after it had touched her genital region, was drunk by those present at the congregation. Yet another woman in the role of the hostess, called thāl-pahāri (dish-vendor), served cooked food and liquor as prasāda (offerings). After dinner everybody used the skirt of the Bhakti-matr for a towel to clean the mouth. No caste taboo, nor any kind of taboo against prohibited food like pork and beef, was observed. Nor any respect was shown to brahmins in particular. The earthen cooking pots used in the ceremony and the plantain-leaves on which food was served were not discarded but were preserved for repeated use on future occasions in the same place or elsewhere. This nocturnal

ceremony was referred to as bhakat-sevā (worship of a fraternity of devotees), to emphasize its congregational aspect. Chanting of mystic devotional songs and dances were a part of the ceremony. A nocturnal session of rebels organised by Panimuwa in 1803 is described by Dutiram Hajarika in the following words :

"Panimuwa and his associates ate every kind of permitted and prohibited meat. Naked, they drank wine and sang devotional songs in the accompaniment of the tokari" (a stringed musical instrument).

It was this cult which is frequently referred to in Assamese chronicles as "a-riitiyā-mat" (unorthodox rites) or as "asurii-mel" (diabolical assembly), in the context of the war preparations of the Moanarias. The nocturnal revelries not only involved indulgence in feasts, drinking, music and dance but also in sex orgies.⁸⁵ Through ceremonial participation in this bacchanalia, which was supposed to cast a protective spell around and rejuvenate the participants, the Moanaria rebels were believed to have acquired their fighting acumen. Besides, sticks allegedly consecrated with magical charm, were also used by the peasant fighters. Their charismatic leaders, Radha and Rukmini in 1769-70 were believed to have acquired occult power that would make the enemy's cannon balls ineffective. Naharkhora was believed to possess a copper plate with magical formulae inscribed on it that gave him occult power. In the 1780s, Harihar Tanti was believed to have cast spell on the enemy in the battlefield by throwing charmed cloth on them.⁸⁶ The myths were sustained by the reluctance of the rank and file royalist troops to fight fellow peasants, and ^{this} resulted in their total demoralisation or desertion to the other camp. The Moanaria Guru, whose every advice was not necessarily heeded to, was looked upon by the rebels as the symbol of persecuted popular aspirations. It was in his name that they took the vow :

"Protected we are by Astabhuj, Saptabhuj and Chaturbhuj,
By ~~his~~ own sword.
The enemy's cut up,
It's his /own / musket that hit the same side.
And Chaturbhuj protects us.
... ..
We will kill or get killed,
Repaid be the debt to our Guru"⁸⁷

There were devotional songs that struck a deep note of pain and despair and ended with an urge for defiance of the bodily limitations. Such songs were generally chanted in chorus in mixed gatherings of men and women. A palace guard, e.g., arranged the following song to be sung as a signal to his conspiring comrades launching an infructuous surprise attack on the royal premises in 1769 :

"The camp is well-barricaded,
And formidable are the guardsmen,
Renounce your love for your body,
Or you will be caught in the meshes of your Ego.
Let your conduct be regulated in recollection
of your Guru's injunctions".

The double meaning and symbolism of this song could hardly be missed.⁸⁸

Literary evidences and subsequent events suggest that Aniruddhadev (1553-1626), the founder of the Moamaria cult, was unmistakably influenced by the Sahaj-jān Tantricism of his day. He blended magic and miracles with the egalitarian content of neo-vaishnavism and was said to have conceded to tribal ways of life in the matter of food habits, caste and man-woman relations (anna-yoni-vichāra). Many of Aniruddha's one hundred and eighty extant songs had a mystic content with a focus on the human body (deha-vichāra) and the futility of the worldly wealth. The symbols in use to convey this idea - the futility of body was often

symbolised by 'kings' e.g. - were real things in life. They were often capable of suggesting a second meaning that could serve the cause of social protest. S.K. Bhuyan wishfully suggests that the Moamaria discontent was ^{possibly} promoted by a literature which was "revolutionary in tone" and "characterised by a political and martial odour". No such literature is, however, extant.⁸⁹

The course of development from neo-vaishnavism to mass insurgency, as this study reveals, was a complicated one. It engulfed many cross-currents of ideas, class interests and layers of social consciousness. Nevertheless, even while recognising the mass character and the complex causation of the revolts, historians have heretofore tended to label it essentially as a religious war. Such a categorisation does not however follow from the available empirical accounts as restored. Religion was at the most just one of the several relevant and even important factors. The Ahom Court itself did not view the civil war as one between two rival religious camps. To them, it was a war between forces of all religions including vaishnavism on one side and banditti on the other side. All such 'bandits' were generally assumed by them to be Moamaria by faith. Moamarias, night-worshippers and rebels were interchangeable terms in the usage of the panic-stricken nobility and their scribes who wrote the chronicles.

The insurgency would not have been so wide-spread had the adherents of the Moamaria faith alone been the participants. The Moran tribe - incidentally they were also Moamaria by faith - started the revolts, but they were soon joined by large sections of the depressed and discontented people of other ethnic origins. The Morans remained, of course, the most determined section in the rebel camp. The vigorous revival of the secret nocturnal sects in the eighteenth century suggests

that large chunks of the rebels increasingly looked forward to these sects, rather than to the established Moamara Satra, for their spiritual sustenance and inspiration. Practitioners of the nocturnal cult were there not only amongst the Moamarias proper, but also amongst the followers of other Kāla-Samhati Satras. Contrary to the advice of their abbots who had defected one after another to the royal camp, the bulk of their disciples - particularly tribal neophytes and untouchables - joined the rebel ranks. In fact, the majority of Ahoms today appear to follow several Kāla-Samhati Satras which still shelter what remains of the nocturnal cult.⁹⁰ Chroniclers, for obvious reasons, lumped together peasant rebels of all categories and even social bandits who mushroomed in the chaos, under one and the same category of 'Moamaria', irrespective of their caste, creed, race and motivation.

Ethnicity, creed and caste factors need not therefore be overemphasized while explaining the nature of the revolts. In the given social milieu, there was no longer any Moran-Ahom conflict as such on racial terms during the period under review. Ahoms, Morans, Barahis and Chutiyas had all been undergoing a process of merger into a larger community through free inter-marriages and the ongoing acculturation for many centuries. In that process all the four tribes had lost much of their separate identities, even before their coming into the fold of Hinduism.⁹¹ Popular hatred was directed not against the Ahom community as such, but against the nobility in general. In fact, like the others, Ahom commoners too were involved in the revolts.

Similarly, it would be falsifying history to suggest that the uprisings were basically against the brahman caste. The State was trying long to drive a wedge between brahmans and Moamarias, particularly by enforcing a ban on spiritual ordination of the former by shudra

abbots since 1702. The image of Moemarias as "killers of brahmins and cows" was mischievously projected by court scribes like Dharmadev Sharma, Maniran Dewan and even by King Gaurinath Sinha.⁹² In fact, the anti-brahman edge of the Moemaria violence in Majuli and other places was directed only against enfeebled priests and abbots who were on the royal side. The Moemarias had no quarrel with ordinary brahmins, many of whom were followers of several Kāla-Samhati Satras, including theirs. Even as late as 1803, Sunanda - the brahman abbot of Kataniper Satra (Kāla-Samhati) - was banished for his complicity in a plot hatched by the rebels.

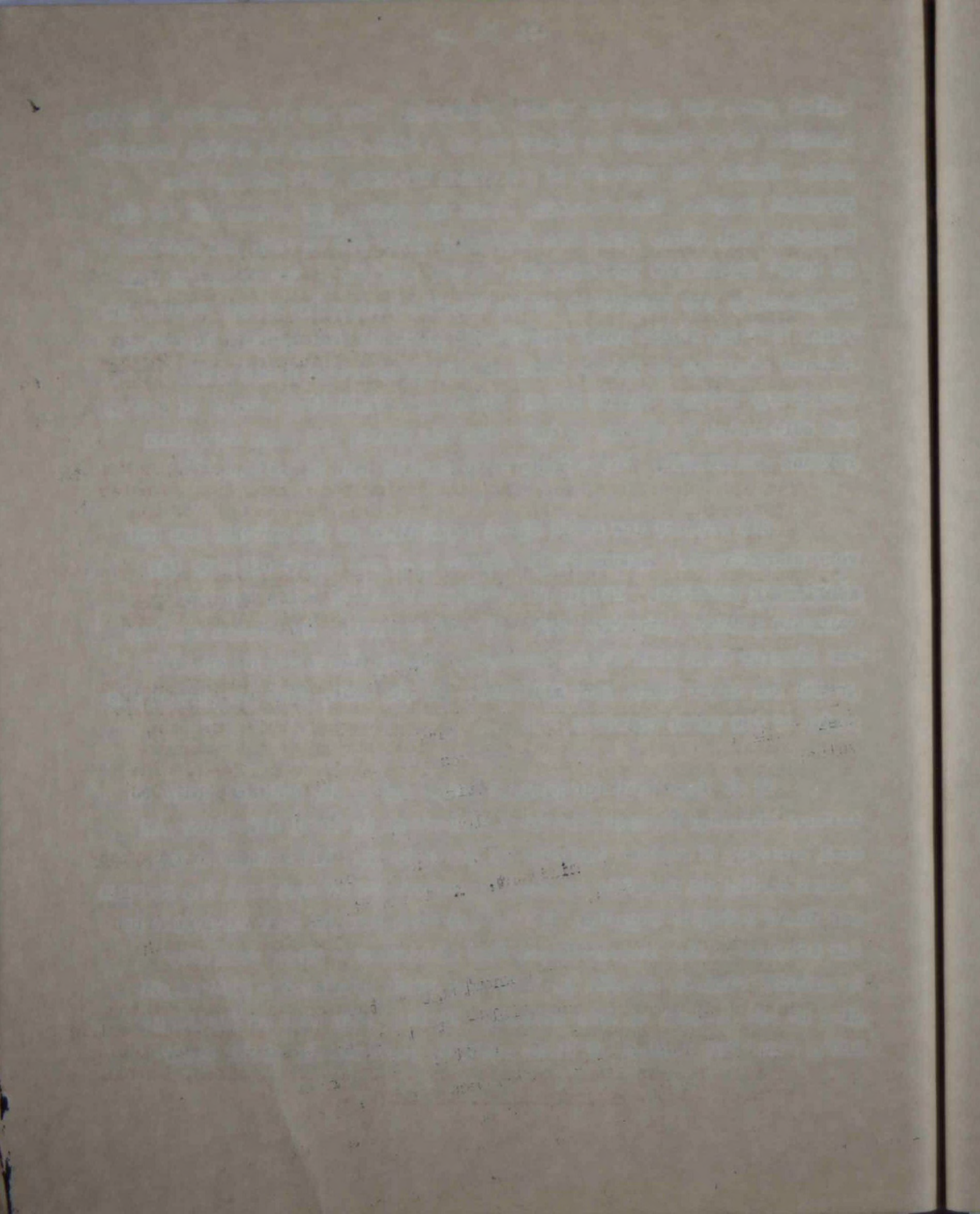
What appeared to Maniran Dewan as 'Matak troubles' was therefore essentially "a now hidden, now open fight" between classes arrayed broadly into two camps. On one side were, by and large, the temporal and spiritual lords, and on the other, the peasantry and the unconsolidated trader and artisan elements that were still linked with it.⁹³ However, the latter were incapable of visualising a revolutionary transformation of the feudal society. The issues involved were social, political and economic justice either within the feudal mould itself or through a retreat to a semblance of primitivity. Popular aspirations often found vicarious expression through a tangled cobweb of magico-religious faith. But beneath the trappings of the complex causation there lay hidden the hard economic core - deeper economic causes than were immediately apparent.

One such economic cause - relevant to one stratum of the peasantry - was the need and demand for the commutation of feudal labour-rent for a light money-tax. The generality of the paiks would have found even such a money tax system oppressive. There was perhaps a vague longing on their part to go back into the golden age of their

tribal past, but that was no more feasible. Nor was it possible for the peasants to go forward on their own to a higher stage of social development. Hence, the outburst of primitive savagery that matched the royalist terror. They wrecked, burnt and looted the properties of the nobility and, then, fumed and fumbled. ^{Conscious} Class war or not, the revolts no doubt ruined the economic base of the nobility. The ruination was completed by the atrocities of the Burmese occupation forces during the years 1817-24, which event immediately preceded the British take-over. Jenkins observed in 1838 - "Most of the upper nobility had small hereditary estates called Khats, which were originally grants of wastes and cultivated by slaves or their service pykes, and were free from revenue assessment. These Khats have greatly run to waste..."⁹⁴

The role of the small slave population in the revolts was not very significant. Economically, slaves were not worse-off than the kanri-paik peasants. Having no militia duties and being held as valuable private property, they had less hazards. The burden on them was lighter than that on the peasants. Hence, there was no special ground for their being more militant. At the most, they too joined the ranks of the rebel peasants.

It is felt that our present knowledge of the subject could be further enriched through sustained field-work in local folk-lore and oral history, a content analysis of the rites and literature of the secret sects, an analysis of the place-names associated with the revolts and their detailed mapping. Little has been done in this direction by our scholars. The comparative method of history - there were many apparently similar revolts in India and other countries - also might give us new insight in this respect. It is a pity that so little is known about the leaders of these revolts, particularly about their



FOOTNOTES

1. Assamese chronicles or buranjis are mostly anonymous. The main source for this study is Tungkhungia Buranji (S.K. Bhuyan, ed., 2nd edn, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Govt. of Assam, Gauhati, 1964). This work was compiled during the years 1804-6 by Shrinath Duwara, a high state official of the civil war period. For citation, we have used the English version - Tungkhungia Buranji or the History of Assam 1681-1806 A.D. (S.K. Bhuyan, ed. and trans., 2nd impr., DHAS, Gauhati, 1968), unless stated otherwise.
2. Captain Thomas Welsh, the commander of the expedition and J.P. Wade, its medical officer, were in Assam during the period from November 1792 to May 1794. Both of them left first-hand accounts of the civil war. See also n.65 below.
3. Maniram Dewan, Buranji-Vivekaratna (Ms, 1838, DHAS, Gauhati); Chidananda Goswami, Aniruddhadever Charitra aru Mayamara Satrar Vamshavali (Dibrugarh, 1931); Utsavananda Goswami, Maloupatharar Buranji (Jorhat, C. 1929).
4. S.K. Bhuyan, Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826 : a history of the relations of Assam with the East India Company from 1771 to 1826, based on original English and Assamese sources (1949; 2nd edn, Gauhati, 1974). It contains a critical survey of the Moamaria disturbances in pp.237-57. Quotes here are from pp.250-1. The commander of a militia division (khel) consisting of upto 6000 militiamen was known as the Kheldar.
5. Introduction, dated 15 Sept. 1932, to the Assamese edn of Tungkhungia, n.1, p.39; Bhuyan, n.4, pp.256-7.
6. "The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure... political, legal, philosophical theories, religious ideas and their further development into systems of dogma - also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggle and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements, in which amid all the endless host of accidents ... the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary". Engels to J. Bloch, London, 21 Sept., 1890, Marx-Engels Correspondence.

7. "The Moamaria revolution : was it a class war?", Daily Assam Tribune (Gauhati) 18 Oct., 1950; "Land rights and social classes in medieval Assam", Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol.3, Sept., 1966, pp.217-39; "Ahom migration : its impact on the rice economy of medieval Assam", Artha Vijnana, Vol.9, June 1967, pp.135-57; "Tribalism to feudalism in Assam", Indian Historical Review, Vol.1, March 1974, pp.65-76; "The medieval economy of Assam", Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol.1, c.1200-1750 (Cambridge, 1982); "The Ahom political system : an enquiry into the State formation process in medieval Assam 1228-1714", Social Scientist, Vol.11, Dec., 1983.
8. In the Brahmaputra Valley - the arena of the civil war - 64 per cent of the Hindu population followed Vaishnavism, 15 per cent Shaktism and less than 2 per cent Shaivism in 1901, - Census Report, Assam, 1901, p.42.
9. Bhuyan, n.4, pp.191-3; for details, Maheswar Neog, Sankaradeva and his Times : Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam (Gauhati University, 1965), pp.347-51; S.N. Sarma, The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam (Gauhati University, 1966) pp.120-1.
10. On the ruins of the Kamarupa empire in North Bengal and Assam, there emerged dozens of petty chiefs designated as bhuyan. They ruled over groups of villages and owned enserfed landed estates. The hereditary bhuyans were either self-styled encroachers on peasant rights or had their claims based on royal grants. Mostly of high-caste and North-Indian migrant origin, educated and well-armed, they formed confederacies to wield local political power. They flourished during the 13th-16th centuries until their suppression by the rising Koch and Ahom powers. For details, E.A. Gait, A History of Assam (3rd revised edn, Calcutta, 1967) pp.39-46 and Neog, n.9, pp.48-58.
11. The Census of 1881 classified the non-Muslim, non-Christian population of the Brahmaputra Valley into three groups - (i) tribes uninfluenced by Hinduism, (ii) tribes in the process of conversion to Hinduism and (iii) Hindu castes. Assam Census Report 1881, pp.22-34 and 63-102. The last group constituted only a little over one-third of the total relevant population. The process of transformation was noted by E.P. Stack, ibid, Chapter IV, p.66-74.
Also see Neog, n.9, p.370 for the earlier context.

12. Guha, "Ahom migration..." (1967), n.7. Transplanted wet-rice cultivation is, on the whole, more labour-intensive than that of dry rice. Its per acre productivity is greater and its reproductive seed consumption, considerably less.
13. Ibid.
14. For the Tai religion, see Dang Nghian Van, "An outline of the Thai in Vietnam", Vietnam Studies, Vol.8, No.32, 1972, pp.188-93 and Ahom Buranji (G.C. Barua, ed. and Trans., Calcutta, 1930) pp.1-23; also, Padmeswar Gogoi, Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs (Gauhati, 1976).
15. Neog, n.9, pp.366-78; Sarma, n.9, pp.63-64.
16. Gurucharita, Canto VII, cited by Hiren Gohain, Natun Prithivi (Assamese periodical, Gauhati), Vol.1, No.2, Feb., 1972, p.169. For a doubt expressed on this point, see Neog, n.9, p.126.
17. Neog, n.9, pp.76-79, 132, 136-7 and 144.
18. In 1847-48, for example the 175-acre Satra campus of the densely-populated Barpeta village housed 7,368 monks. In two villages - one of weavers and another of oil-pressers, each inhabited by two to three thousand people - all were found to be disciples of the Barpeta Satra. Members of the Mahapurushia (i.e. of Purusha and Nika) sects in western Assam were mostly traders-cum-cultivators. Their boats laden with agricultural produce, pottery etc. were to be found "in every creek of Assam and as far down as Sirajganj". The literacy rate amongst them was higher than the average. - E.T. Dalton, "'Mahapurushayas' a sect of Vaishnavas in Assam", Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol.20, 1850, pp.455-69.
19. Neog, n.9, pp.374-5 and Sarma, n.9, p.181. The date is controversial.
20. Satsari Asam Buranji : A Collection of Seven Old Assamese Buranjis or chronicles with Synopses in Assamese (S.K. Bhuyan, ed., 3rd edn., Gauhati University, 1969), pp.98-99.
21. Ibid. pp.117-8; Gait, no.10, pp.173-4; Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.28-30.
22. Ibid. pp.33-34.
23. Gait, n.10, p.290.
24. For the conditions of the land-grants, see the relevant texts in Maheswar Neog, ed., Prachya-Sasanavali : an Anthology of Royal

Charters etc, inscribed on stone, copper, etc., of Kamarupa, Assam (Saumara), Koch-Bihar, etc., from 1205 A.D. to 1847 A.D. (Gauhati University, 1974).

25. The militia system as it stood in later times has been described in many secondary sources, such as, Williamson Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam (Calcutta/London, 1841) pp.200-5; Gait, n.10, pp.248-51; Bhuyan, n.4, pp.10-11, 339 and 529-30. But how the system gradually took shape in response to social forces remains in these sources largely unexplained. For the dynamics of the system, see my papers listed in n.7.
26. For the basis of the estimate, my 1966 paper, *ibid*, p.71 and the relevant footnote there. Each officer was, in general, individually allowed 5 per cent of the men under his immediate or over-all command; and sometimes even upto 10 per cent.
27. Comp : "Should the direct producers not be confronted by a private landowner, but rather, as in Asia, under direct subordination to a state which stands over them as their landlord and simultaneously as sovereign, the rent and taxes coincide, or rather there exists no tax which differs from this form of ground rent. Under such circumstances, there need exist no stronger political or economic pressure than that common to all subjection to that state. The state is then the supreme lord. Sovereignty here consists in the ownership of land concentrated on a national scale. But, on the other hand, no private ownership of land exists, although there is both private and common possession and use of land". Karl Marx, Capital A Critique of Political Economy, Vol.III (F. Engels, ed., 4th impr., Moscow, 1971) pp.790-1. (Emphasis ours).
28. Bhuyan, n.4, p.399 and Gait, n.10, p.249.
29. One aspect of feudalism - i.e. political decentralisation - was more prominent in this relationship than centralisation.
30. Satsari, n.20, pp.76-7; Gait, n.10, pp.175 and 190. Attempts at standardised land measurement appear to have started since 1609, but a regular survey was not undertaken before the 1680s.
31. Ms. chronicle of Lakshmi Sinha cited by Bhuyan, n.4, pp.269-70.
32. That the paiks joining the monasteries in large numbers claimed exemption from their obligatory services and thus annoyed the

State is noted by Gait, n.10, p.173. The rest of the argument follows from an analysis of the circumstances.

33. Information collated from Harakanta Barua Sadar-Amin, Assam Buranji (S.K. Bhuyan, ed., 2nd edn., DHAS, Gauhati, 1962) p.40 and other buranjis. Also Neog, n.9, pp.78-79; B.K. Barua, Studies in Early Assamese Literature (Nowgong, 1953) p.97; Shibabuddin Talish, "Fathiya-i-ibriyya (Jadunath Sarkar, trans., excerpt)", Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Vol.I, pp.179-94 and Thomas Welsh, "Report on Assam (1794)" reproduced in A. Mackenzie, History of the Relations of the Government with Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal (Calcutta 1884), pp.374-99. Both Talish and Welsh noted the absence of a grain market in Assam - a measure of the limited commercialisation.
34. Gait, n.10, p.276.
35. Such alienation of land assumed a threatening proportion in course of the 18th century. Out of the 294,027 acres of cultivable lands on record in Kamrup, about half were found alienated for religious and other purposes by 1824. Of the 16,512 paiks there, only one-fourth were then in the direct service of the State, the rest being employed in the service of temples or of other land-grantees and officers of the State, - Bhuyan, n.4, p.551. According to a provisional land survey of 1825-26, out of 706,313 acres of cultivable lands in Lower Assam (i.e. Kamrup and parts of Nowgong and Darrang) 150,477 acres, or 21 per cent, were held under rent-free grants or were otherwise exempted from the payment of revenue. N.K. Barooah, David Scott in North-East India A Study in British Paternalism (Delhi, 1970), pp.97-98.
36. Gait, n.10, p.191; Bhuyan, n.4, pp.37-38; John Butler, Sketch of Assam with some Account of the Hill Tribes by an Officer (London, 1847), pp.214-17.
37. Guha, "Ahom migration..." (1967), n.7, pp.139-42; Sadar-Amin, n.33, pp.12-13.
38. According to Hannay, "the Matakas are divided into two distinct portions - the Muttucks of the Upper Debroo being Morans, a people who by the traditions of the country are the remains of an independent tribe called 'Bar'ai Morans'... They are designated Morans or upper nine families of Muttucks. Their lands are high,... their villages are scattered...". The other portions of the Matakas were

principally ^{found} on the banks of the Sessa, a tributary of the Burhi-Dihing, and were chiefly composed of Ahoms and other Assamese people who had embraced the Moamaria faith. They were designated as the lower nine families of Matakas. The Upper Matakas (i.e. Morans proper) were twice as numerous as the lower Matakas.

Yet a third group of people - all non-Matakas and mostly disciples of Brahma-Samhati Satras - were largely composed of royal serfs and paiks assigned to nobles, spread over a number of landed estates (khat), situated between the Dibru and the Burhi-Dihing (Rajakhat, Tengakhat, Madarkhat etc.). Lower Matak, inhabited by the last two groups and new migrants, consisted of a much larger land area than upper Matak. See S.O. Hannay, "A short account of the Moa March sect and of the country at present occupied by the Bor Senaputsee", Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol.8, 1838, pp.671-9 and Hannay to Jenkins, 4 April 1839, Foreign Pol. Proc., 14 August 1839, No.105. Also see A.J.M. Mills, Report on the Province of Assam (Calcutta, 1854) appendix P - Lekhimpur.

39. Quotes from White to Jenkins, 26 Jan., 1839, Foreign Pol. Proc., 14 August 1839, No.105 (NAI).

40. Haliram Dhekial Phukan, Assam Buranji (in Bengali, 1829; J. Bhattacharya ed., 2nd edn., Gauhati, 1962) p.96; Sarma, n.9, pp.86-90; Dewan, n.2.

41. "The head of a Kala Samhati Satra, i.e. the Guru, is required by tradition to salute, with his knees bending, even a devotee of the so-called depressed classes, in return for the latter's salutation. But in three other Samhatis, particularly in the Brahma Samhati, the caste privileges have been retained". - Sarma, n.9, pp.202-3.

42. The Morans were contemptuously referred to as "insectivorous Morans" (gandhi-khova) - Tungkhungia, n.1, p.65. The Nadials (fishermen) and the Haris (scavengers) were two of a few untouchable castes. Under the Ahom rule, they were forced to tatoo their foreheads, respectively, ^{with} marks of a fish and a broom. Gait, n.10, p.265.

43. Gait, n.10, pp.192 and 249. According to reliable sources, there were only 80,000 paiks available for state service immediately before the civil war. Francis Hamilton Buchanan, An Account of Assam First Compiled in 1807-14 (S.K. Bhuyan, ed. 2nd impr., DHAS, Gauhati, 1963), p.36.

44. Dewan, n.2. The voluntary contribution to monasteries took the form of a regular tithe (guru-kar), a customary obligation, institutionalised in course of the 18th century. The popular saying, "Tithes to the guru and taxes to the King" (gurur kar, rajar khajana) reminds one of the early Christian precept - "Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's, to God what is God's". See Sarma, n.9, p.114 and Neog, n.9, p.332.
45. Sadar-Amin, n.33, pp.76-77; Tungkhungia, n.1, p.66.
46. Ibid, pp.60-69 and Bhuyan, n.4, 206-11.
47. Quote as reproduced in Tungkhungia, n.1, p.67.
48. Quote as reproduced by Bhuyan, n.4, p.210.
49. Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.66 and 68.
50. Ibid, pp.70-71.
51. Ibid.
52. Dewan, n.2. Also cited by Bhuyan, n.4. pp.207-8.
53. Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.71-72. The surviving lines in Assamese are : "praja oi jarou rouva, chekani oi chapai dhara".
54. Dharmadev Sharma, Dharmodaya-natakam (ms). I had access to a transcript temporarily in the possession of late Dandinath Kalita of Tezpur, many years ago. But it is now irretrievably lost.
55. Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.75-78.
56. Dewan, n.2.
57. Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.95-100; Satsari, n.20, p.155.
58. Bhuyan, n.4, p.224.
59. Satsari, n.20, p.157.
60. Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.95-102.
61. Bhuyan, n.4, p.226; Gait, n.10, pp.204-5.

62. Tungkhungia, n.1, p.109.
63. Bhuyan, n.4, pp.230-1 and 234-5.
64. Ibid, pp.233-4, 270 and 350-1. The first attempt to arrest Sindhura at Nowgong by Welsh's men was foiled in November 1793 by an armed crowd of some two thousand people. This village Hampden was apprehended and executed later in 1795.
65. J.P. Wade, An Account of Assam (1800 A.D.; B. Sharma ed., North Lakhimpur, 1927) pp.242-45. Wade compiled his account mainly from two old Assamese chronicles.
66. Bhuyan, n.4, pp.306-9.
67. Ibid, pp.271-80, 327-9 and 431-2.
68. Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.121-5 and Bhuyan, n.4, p.229. For commanders' names, Dutiram Hazarika, Assam Padya Buranji (S.K. Bhuyan, ed., 2nd edn, Gauhati, 1964) p.101.
69. Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.129-32; Bhuyan, n.4, pp.385-8 and 436-7.
70. Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.142-5 and 147-8; Satsari, n.20, pp.176-7.
71. Letters from the Raja and the Bargohain of Assam, both dated 8 Asharh 1724 shaka to Govt. of India in S.N. Sen, ed., Prachin Bangla Patra Sankalan (Records in Oriental Languages, Vol.1, Bengali letters Calcutta University, 1942) pp.90-94.
72. Satsari, n.20, p.178; Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.165-6 and 194-5. The cult of night-worship (rāti-khowā) was a legacy of suppressed tantric rituals and tribal fertility rites, associated with mother-cults, which persisted in rural protests within the authoritarian feudal society.
74. Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.152-3, 157-8 and 195; Satsari, n.20, pp.179-83.
75. Bhuyan, n.4, p.437.
76. Tungkhungia, n.1, p.140.
77. Ibid, pp.191-2.
78. White to Jenkins, 26 Jan., 1839, Foreign Pol. Proc., 14 August 1839, No.105 (NAI); Lahiri, n.2, p.206.

79. Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.XXX, 85, and 190-1.
80. Bhuyan, n.4, pp.328-9 and 506; quote from Welsh's 'report on Assam (1794)', n.33. Transitional difficulties however lingered on for decades, first due to the lack of commercialisation to a sufficient degree and, second, due to the subsequent decrease and chronic shortage in the supply of coins under the given unsettled political conditions. Nevertheless, even the people of upper Assam reportedly preferred money-taxation to the former system, provided the rates were low. Foreign Pol. Proc., 10 June 1831, No.58 (NAI).
81. Hannay to Jenkins, 4 April 1839 and White to Jenkins 26 Jan. 1839, Foreign Pol. Proc., 14 August 1839, No.105 (NAI). The rates of taxation in Matak were much below those in the Ahom or in the British territory in Assam. Consequently, emigrants to Matak were "better-off than most classes of ryots in Assam" (ibid). Contemporary estimates of Matak's population by British officers during 1825-39 ranged between 50,000 and 100,000. Followers of the Brahma-Samhati monasteries, mostly immigrants, constituted a third of the population of Matak.
82. From the mid-18th century, the heads of important neo-vaisnavite monasteries had to attend the royal court on all special occasions. Royal visits, too, were paid occasionally to these monasteries. As a result, some of them soon began to ape the royal court in their display of pomp and splendour. Their paiks were organised into groups headed by Baras and Saikias, as in the State militia, to facilitate the extraction of labour-rent from them. Sama, n.9, pp.186-8.
83. See Bhuyan, n.4, pp.205 and 207-8.
Towards the end of the 18th century, the Moamarias were no more united under a single Guru. Their original Satra split into several independent Satras. Dinjay (1816), Puranimati (Puranipam), Tipbuk, Garpara (1807) and Madarkhat (1880) were its offshoots. Endle writes that in earlier times, Dinjay was headed by a Kachari (Gaon-) burha, Garpara by an Ahom (Gaon-) burha and Puranimati by a Khatwal (Gaon-) Burha - Sydney Endle, The Kacharis (London, 1911) p.88. The schism appears to have taken place on considerations of ethnicity and private gains.
84. As described by Dhekial-Phukkan, n.40, pp.96-97; Padya Buranji, n.68, p.122.

85. "In Ankila-bhakti no restriction in respect of food and estables is observed ... Sanbala-bhakti consists of sexual enjoyment. Lampata-bhakti is the combination of the above two". Sarma n.9, p.138. His source is an 18th-century Sanskrit treatise.
86. Bhuyan, n.4, pp.198-9 and 223; Tungkhungia, n.1, pp.61, 66, 97 and 113; Padya Buranji, n.68, p.101.
87. For the first five lines, Tungkhungia, n.1, p.66. For the last two lines, Bhuyan, n.4, p.255..
88. Ms Chronicle of Lakshmi Sinna, cited by Bhuyan, n.4, p.256. Our translation here slightly departs from that by Bhuyan. The other suggestive lines of the song or rather an extant variant of it, are as follows in a free translation :-

"Oh brothers! don't while away your life,
For the forces of prachanda-vega (High speed i.e. Time)
are rushing towards you!

Don't your senses make you aware
That soldiers have pulled down the stone-walls?
They're breaking the brick-walls, too?
Footmen of the Yavana have blocked the gates,
Exit is impossible now.

Sounds of horses' trampling on the sea,
The boat's sure to be drowned!

Oh Bhogananda!

Practise not devotion at the cost of your body,
Or you'll be caught

One more in the cobweb of mayā,"

With variations, ^{/some of} these and similar lines appear in several songs of Aniruddhaev.

89. Bhuyan, n.4 p.256. See also Sarma, n.9, pp.138-9.

The following fragment of a folk-song, still extant, is indicative of the marital odour :

"Here's the bow, here's the arrow,
Raise your bow, oh Dekadev!
Let us march to kill the Mulungs
Hold fast the steering oar,
Oh Dekadev of Matak!
The bat is full of our clansmen".

Neog has brought out the fact that the allegory of Prachanda-vega is related in the bhagavata-purana, Book IV. He suggests that

though Aniruddha's songs were used by the Moamaria rebels as signals for action, these did not contain any revolutionary content as such. For his basically different assessment of the character of the uprisings, see Maheswar Neog, Socio-Political Events in Assam Leading to the Militancy of the Mayamariya Vaisnavas (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1982).

90. "The pakā section of the Ahoms, forming probably the majority, follows undoubtedly a tantric line of worship. ... It would require further investigation to bring to light a fuller picture of their religion ... The Ahoms of the pakā line are disciples of such Satras as Ceca, Chaliha, Budbari, Katani, Kardoiguria, Baregharia and others all of which are of Kalasamhati". - Gogoi, "The Ahoms' change of religion", n.14, p.22. (Pakā bhakats are those who offer cooked food at their worship in congregations).
91. Morans, Chutiyas and Barahis often identified themselves with such categories as 'Moran-Ahom', 'Moran-Chutiya' and 'Chutiya-Ahom' etc., before the Census authorities in the 19th century. In other words, they did not know where to put themselves.
92. Dharmodaya-nātakam, n.54. For Dewan's fabrications in this respect, see Dewan, n.2. The Moamaris were charged with the slaying of brahmans and cows in a couple of letters addressed by King Gaurinath Sinha to the Government of India.
93. Quote from Marx and Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party (Moscow edn., 1965), pp.41-45.
94. Jenkins to the Secretary to the Government, 9 December, 1838, Foreign Pol. Proc., 26 December, 1838, No.94 (NAI).

GLOSSARY

- anna-yoni-vicāra = considerations of commensality and connubium.
- āsuriī = diabolical.
- bahatiyā = a serf/slave attached to a farm.
- Barbarua = one of the five highest officers of the Ahom kingdom.
- desh = conquered territory.
- eka-sharana = to take refuge into one God - a principle of Vaishnava monotheism.
- ek dev ek sev = One God, one worship.
- ek vine nāhi kev = There is none else other than the One.
- gāonburhā = a village headman.
- goswāmi = a spiritual preceptor of the brahman caste.
- guru = a spiritual preceptor in relation to his disciple.
- guru-kar = tithe payable to a guru for maintenance of his establishment.
- kheldār = an officer of high rank in charge of a khel or division of 6000 militia men.
- Mahanta = a non-brahman religious preceptor, heading a satra.
- Marān (Morān) = a tribe probably of Kachin origin, but having linguistic affinity with the Bodo-Kachāris.
- Kachāri = a tribe, also called Bodo-Kachari or Bodo.
- gb.