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- ★ FORMATION, GROWTH AND BREAKDOWN OF IMMIGRANT VOTE BANKS OF CONGRESS IN ASSAM
- ★ FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL: POPULAR PROTESTS IN LATIN AMERICA DURING 2011-2015
- ★ COLONIAL INDIRECT RULE AND THE MAOIST INSURGENCY IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA
- ★ REINTERPRETING BODO LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM IN ASSAM
- ★ A BRIEF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE IDEA OF INDIGENEITY
- ★ THE PLEASURES OF BEING A 'KANIYA': THE POLITICS OF 'LAZINESS' IN COLONIAL ASSAM (C. 1854-1930)
- ★ OPEN VERSUS CLOSED BORDER: INDIA-BANGLADESH BORDER IN THE 21ST CENTURY
- ★ NORTH EAST REGION IN INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY: ISSUES AND CONCERNS OF CONNECTIVITY AND REGIONAL PREPAREDNESS
- ★ GLOBALIZATION, TEA INDUSTRY AND TRADE UNIONISM: AN OVERVIEW WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM CHAH KARMACHARI SANGHA (ACKS)
- ★ CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER AND CHINESE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE: THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM
- ★ POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUP: A FRAMEWORK OF UNDERSTANDING
- ★ GENDER AND IDENTITY IN LITERATURE FROM INDIA'S NORTHEAST
- ★ THE MAKING OF JORHAT: UNDERSTANDING THE PATTERNS OF MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT (2500 BC TO 1947AD)
- ★ DAM(N)ED THE KOPILI: REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS
- ★ ROLE OF STATE IN ENABLING HEALTHCARE COORDINATION IN INDIA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC
- ★ MAKING OF TRADITIONAL RICE BEER AMONG TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF NORTHEAST INDIA WITH REFERENCE TO 'HOR-ALANG' OF THE KARBI COMMUNITY
- ★ PROSPECTS OF GANDHIAN WORLD ORDER IN A VIOLENCE- STRICKEN WORLD
- ★ TROUBLED PERIPHERY - CRISIS OF INDIA'S NORTH EAST BY SUBIR BHAUMIK, NEW DELHI: SAGE PUBLICATIONS INDIA PVT. LTD., PAPERBACK EDITION, 2015; PP 305'

**THE MAKING OF JORHAT: UNDERSTANDING THE
PATTERNS OF MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT
(2500 BC TO 1947AD)**

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Abstract

The history of migration and patterns of settlement are always important to understand social formation of a particular area. Multiple layers of our past as well as contemporary times are often built upon the forces released by human migration. With an interdisciplinary approach migration studies is now a popular academic enterprise both in humanities and social sciences engaging scholars to understand socio-cultural, political and economic aspects of our past. However, such an interdisciplinary approach to understand a particular region is not a popular historiographical norm in Assam. The present paper is a humble attempt to form an idea about the population structure and migration pattern of Jorhat, Assam from 2500 BC till to the colonial period. The paper, however, has limited its discussion to the Jorhat City as demarcated by John Peter Wade. According to Wade, Jorhat is bounded by river Dholi in the South, Bar Ali in the North, river Disoi in the east and Khutiapota in the west. Keeping in view this geographical boundary, an attempt has been made to understand the history of migration and settlement in this region. However, for the sake of contextualizing the discussion the first part of the paper has made an appraisal of entire Upper Assam and then tried to discuss Jorhat specific migration and settlement patterns.

Key words: *Migration, Settlement, Tibeto-Burmese language, river*

Introduction

Human history is basically an unending story of migration. Multiple layers of our past as well as contemporary times are often built upon the forces released by human migration. With an interdisciplinary approach migration studies is now a popular academic enterprise both in humanities and social sciences engaging scholars to understand socio-cultural, political and economic aspects of our past. However, such an interdisciplinary approach to understand a particular region is not a popular historiographical norm in Assam. The present paper is a humble attempt to form an idea about the population structure and migration pattern of Jorhat district of Assam from the prehistoric time till the colonial period. The paper also has limited its discussion to the Jorhat City as demarcated by John Peter Wade. According to Wade, Jorhat is bounded by river Dholi in the South, Bar Ali in the North, River Disoi in the east and Khutiapota in the west.¹ However, for the sake of contextualizing the discussion the first part of the paper made an appraisal of entire Upper Assam.

Making of the Upper Assam

Although there is no significant archeological discovery related to Paleolithic or Neolithic age of Upper Assam we can still assume that in this region there were no human settlement in early ages and human settlement only occurred relatively late. One of the main reasons for this relatively late human settlement is its unique environment. If we observe the satellite images of Brahmaputra valley, we find that it appears like a big den engulfed by mountains from three directions, with a single passage for water drainage. Sihabuddin Talish in 17th century has recorded that the place experience eight months of heavy rainfall annually with light showers for the four months of winter as well². If we take a look at the annual rainfall for last 100 years, we find it to be decreasing. This suggests that, the more we go backward in time, the higher is the amount of rainfall. When human civilization settled around Indus Valley, at that time the Brahmaputra Valley was an excessively rainy, water logged bog, infested with flies. Slowly and gradually the amount of rainfall decreased and the valley became suitable for human habitation. In Upper Assam, Neolithic remains of the Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer) speaking people are found from 2500 BC³.

Understanding the patterns of migration and settlement in Jorhat

Linguistic evidence, socio-religious customs, the names of places like Teok, Tipam, words like 'Joha' 'Jopa', 'Tokona' are the evidence of the fact that the Austro-Asiatic speaking Khasis once lived in the plain of Assam, and the hills of North Cachar and Karbi-Anglong⁴. Hence it can also be assumed that the Khasis also settled in Jorhat, the centre of the plains of Assam. This Austro-Asiatic language speaking Khasi people migrated from East Campusia-Laos in 2500BC via Patkai hills and settled in the Brahmaputra valley⁵. The remains of Megalith culture of North East India are the contribution Austro-Asiatic Khasis. Till today megaliths in North East India have been found in Meghalaya, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland as well as in Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Rongkini of Karbi-Anglong. Even in places like Borabong, Kartang, Bulachand, Kubak of N.C Hills many megaliths have been found⁶. A group of researchers, guided by Dr. Dilip Kumar Medhi of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, have excavated a total of 20 megaliths in the area covering from Hamreng to Jaintia Hills⁷. In December, 2004, another megalith was discovered in Mizoram⁸. Likewise, megaliths were discovered in Jamiri, West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh and Angami area of Naga Hills⁹. But no megaliths were discovered yet to the east of river Dhansiri including Jorhat. But the settlement of Austro-Asiatic language speaking Khasis in this area cannot be ruled out on this ground. In our opinion, the reason is geological. The stones suitable for the making of Megaliths are not available in the area from the eastern bank of Dhansiri to Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh and the Border area of Myanmar. Moreover, tools used for cutting the stones cannot be made from the iron nodules, the only source of iron are in upper Assam. According to John Henry Hutton, the Austric people brought the Megalith culture from Indonesia to this region¹⁰.

The second line of migration to Jorhat as well as to Assam was the Tibeto-Chinese language speaking (with Burmese sub-language) Mongolian people. They entered Assam before 2000 BC in groups¹¹. The Dimasa Kacharis, the Boro Kacharis and the Mech are the offshoots of these Tibeto-Burmese speaking people. These people entered Jorhat from Southern Tibet via Lower Assam from the west¹².

However, according to Gait, these Tibeto-Burmese speaking people entered Jorhat from east¹³. Austro-Asiatic language speaking Khasis were forced by the newly arrived Mongolian Bodos, to leave the plains of Assam, Karbi-Anglong and North Cachar Hills and settle in Khasi Hills.

TL dating of soil layer from beneath the Kamakhya Temple has proved the settlement of Indo-European language speaking people in Lower Assam before 2200 years¹⁴. We have some data about the influx of Indo-European language speaking people through Jorhat from west, even though their permanent settlement is doubtful. Gait has mentioned that these people went to Myanmar via Upper Assam plain (Jorhat) along the river Brahmaputra and they established a new kingdom. According to this source, an Indian king Samuda (Saumudra?) went across Brahmaputra valley and ruled in Myanmar in 105 AD¹⁵. There may be a relation between “Kalita Desh” of east as mentioned made in “Charit- puthi” and the kingdom established by King Saumudra.

There is also some evidence of the Tibeto-Burmese speaking people’s settlement in Jorhat. In 1839, a British officer named E.R. Grange, while studying the History of Dimapur interacted with the Dimasa Kacharis of North Cachar. They told him that the city of Dimapur was built by the fourth Kachari King Chakradhwaj and they also further asserted that the capital of Chakradhwaj’s ancestors was at Jorhat¹⁶. However, there are differences of opinion regarding the year of the establishment of the capital of Kachari Kingdom in Dimapur. According to Sonaram Thaosen, the year was 1086 AD¹⁷. However Upendra Chandra Guha stated it as 1150 AD¹⁸. Despite of these controversies, we can conclude that till 1086 AD Jorhat was dominantly settled by Kacharis and thus was a part of Kachari kingdom. But when the Ahoms entered Jorhat, the area was a swampy, waterlogged and very unhygienic place with sparse population. It is a mystery yet to be solved as to why the Kacharis left Jorhat without any war or conflict or how come a place which was a capital till the other day became unhygienic and unsuitable for human habitation all of a sudden.

Gait mentioned that once River Dihing flowed to the distant north of Dibrugarh and fell into the Brahmaputra¹⁹. At that time there was no trace of Majuli. The probable map of Upper Assam was as follows:

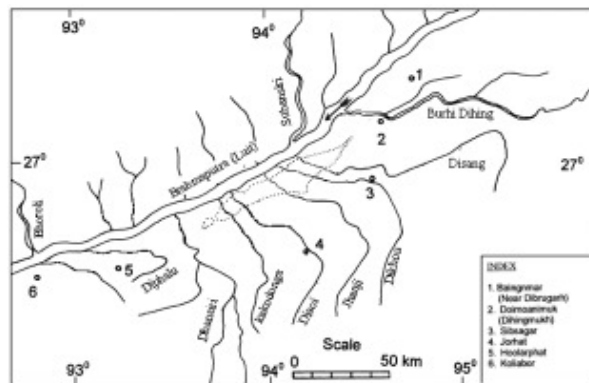


Fig. 1: Map of Upper Assam before 11th Century

In 11th century, the topography of Upper Assam underwent changes due to a sudden geological event. Actually there is an east-west trending fault just below the present course of the river Brahmaputra¹. As a result of activation of this fault, the river Dihing changed her courses and flowed parallel to the Brahmaputra and merged into Brahmaputra at Lokhow near Bokakhat². Because of this sudden geological change many areas of Jorhat submerged and converted to swampy land. Geologists have prepared the map of Jorhat after this fault activation episode.

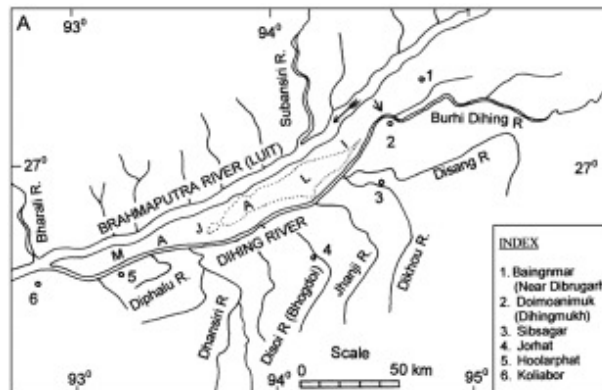


Fig. 2. Map of Jorhat after 11th Century

(Map prepared by J N Sharma and M K Phukan, *Geomorphology*, Vol. 60, Issues 1, 2, 3, May 2004)

Due to this geological change the landmass located between Dihing and Brahmaputra began to be signified as “Majali” (not Majuli). Jorhat remained a marshland with dense jungle until the big embankment named Bar-ali was constructed. It is clearly mentioned in chronicles that “Bar-ali” was build to prevent flood¹. Later experts and researchers including John Peter Wade have also agreed on the importance of Bar-ali in flood control².

After shifting the course of river Dihing, Mirjumla, Jean Baptiste Chevalier or whatever else came for the preceding 700 years, all came following the upward course of river Dihing, parallel to the river Brahmaputra from Lakhow. There is significant information in the Ahom chronicles regarding this and interestingly up to 14th century, the Ahom did not try to cross the river Dikhow. In 14th century, there are several instances of Ahom invasions into the Kachari Kingdom by crossing the river Dikhow. But all these chronicles indicate the presence of Kacharis in and around Dergaon only¹. But there is no record of any human settlement in the area between Dikhow and Dergaon, which infact substantiates our hypothesis.

Even for long, after the arrival of Ahom to Assam, at least till 1473 AD, Dikhow was the boundary between the Kachari Kingdom and Ahom territory. But during the region of Suhungmung, in 1526 AD, Kacharis were pushed back to Dhanshri Valley and Ahom established new border out post at Morangi. But there is no information about any organized human settlement in Jorhat area at that time. It was only after establishing their outpost at Morangi that the Ahoms started to settle in Jorhat area systematically². During the Ahom rule though there was no large scale migration to Jorhat took place yet small scale migration under royal patronage was recorded. When King Suhungmung Dihingia Raja defeated the Chutias, he settled the blacksmiths and other artisans of Chutia Kingdom at Basha (old name of Jorhat)³. As mentioned earlier Bar-Ali was built by Suhungmung from Gargaon along the river Dihing (present day Brahmaputra) to prevent flood and facilitate a large human habitation⁴. However, most probably the construction did not reach up to Jorhat. The further extension of Bar-ali to Dergaon took place

under the aegis of King Pratap Singh⁵. The term “Bar-Ali” was popular from this time itself. Pratap Singh established a village called Gajpur which was to look after the training and temptation of royal elephants. Records say that Mirjumla found the village deserted with four chained elephant when he came to this place⁶. At this time small scale settlement was only concentrated along the bank of the rivers. Sihabuddin Talish, who came with Mirjumla in 1662AD mentioned in his note “Tarikh-i-Assam” about a large boat artisan’s village (Naosaliya Gaon) on the bank of river Dihing and near the mouth of Kakodonga River⁷. At that time Kakodonga was connected with Dihing.

During the days of King Jaydwaj Singh, a “Khat” was given to Auniati Satra in the year 1653 AD on tract of land left by the Disoi river and few “Paik”s were also allotted. This “khat” was later known as “Karangakhat” as this place was overgrown with “karanga” grass. But still this place was sparsely populated and covered with dense forests. So king Godadhar Singh (1681-1696) exiled the vaishnavite saints to the Toklai area of Jorhat^{8,9,10}. So till the last revolt of Moamoriyas (1785-1798), few settlements were made in and around the forest tract of the Basa Doiyang area. During the reign of King Rudra Singh, two Kayastha Bhuyans were trained as Goldsmiths and granted lands in Charigaon near Jorhat. Even during the reign of Rajeswar Singh, Latuwa Bordoloi was appointed by establishing a royal gold smithy near Kenduguri. The Kayastha goldsmiths of Jorhat are descendents of these three families.¹¹

We have already mentioned that the main constraint for human habitation in Jorhat was the flood caused by the river Dihing. Till 1750 AD Jorhat was located on the bank of the river Dihing and Majuli didn’t exist at that time. In 1750, a very big flood occurred and in the popular memory it is known as “Soka- sakini”. During this flood, the narrow tract of land between Brahmaputra and Dihing was eroded and the Brahmaputra started flowing on the course of Dihing. As a result, the river island “Majuli” emerged and Jorhat took the shape of the present geographical setup¹².

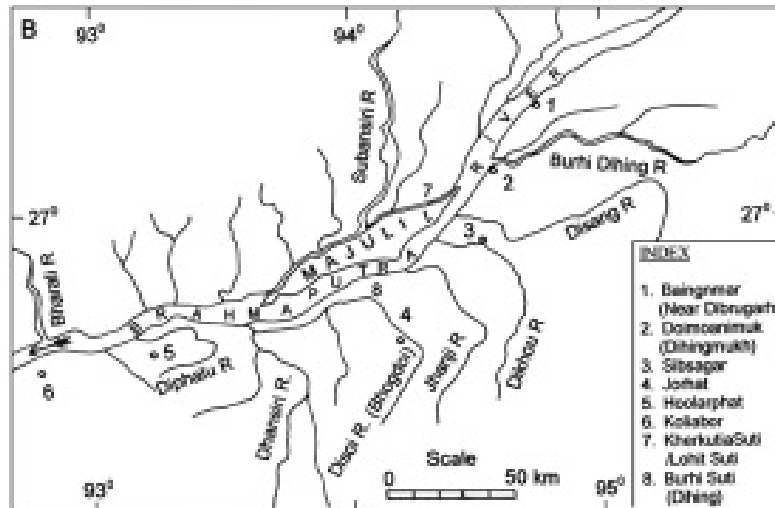


Fig: 3. Map of Jorhat area after 1750 A D.

Till 1827AD, the present day Brahmaputra was known as river Dihing. A map of Assam was drawn by a Flemish cartographer Phelippe Vandermaelen published from Belgium in 1827 AD, where the present course of river the Brahmaputra was shown as river Dihing¹.

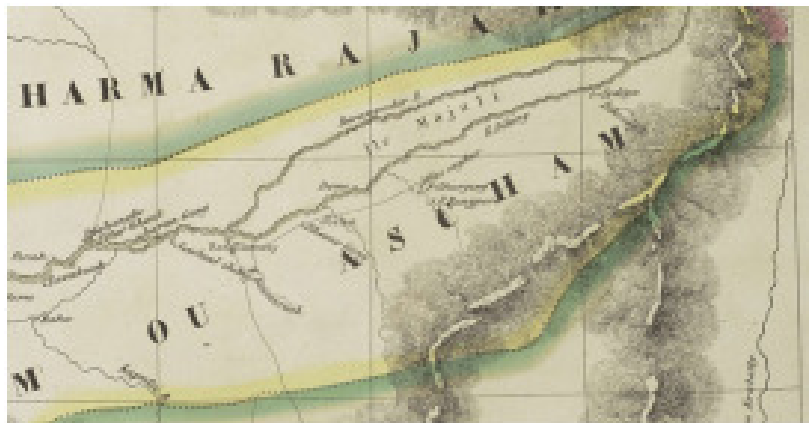


Fig. 4. Phelippe Vandermaelen's Map of 1827

French business man Jean Baptiste Chevalier visited Assam during 1756 A D. When he sailed along the river Dihing (present Brahmaputra) from Dergaon, he mentioned about thickly populated villages. Like Sihabuddin, Chevalier also mentioned about the big artisan's village on the bank of river Dihing. He then mentioned about Baligaon on the bank of river Dihing (present Brahmaputra) as a large village¹. All these indicate that after the course change of the river Brahmaputra, the places nearby Jorhat became almost suitable for human settlement. During the reign of Rajeswar Singh, the places nearby Jorhat were thickly populated.

In 1802 AD, river Disoi was directed towards Jorhat city according to the plan of Purnananda Burhagohain². Na Ali was also constructed from Jorhat City to Naga Hills during the reign of Kamaleshwar Singh. Similarly, a canal was also constructed adjacent to Na Ali to facilitate water transport to Rajabahar³. The remnant of this canal was seen until the seventies of last century near places like Ranibheta, Dholi etc. It was after the Ahom capital was shifted to Jorhat, the last systematic and planned migration under royal patronage had taken place. Though there is no thorough written record of this migration is available, but many oral information are available about that episode. Towards the end of the rule of King Gaurinath Singh and during the reign of King Kamaleshwar Singh, various officers such as 'Gohain', 'Phukan', 'Barbaruah', 'Cangrung', 'Buruk' and supervisors of agriculture, industry and trade like 'Baruah', 'Doloi', 'Borah', 'Saikia', 'Hazarika' were settled round the Jorhat city⁴. After this last large scale migration, the type of migration changed to individual level. So the proper and total documentation is almost impossible. However, we have some stray references mainly concerning to migration of certain distinguished families to Jorhat.

Considerable change in the population structure of Jorhat took place with the outbreak of Moamariya revolution and after the arrival of Captain Welsh. After the revolution, Purnananda Burhagohain placed Nasibchand and Fakirchand, two north Indian soldiers, permanently at Jorhat. The captives of Sadiya battle were also settled at the bank of Disoi during the reign of Kamaleshwar Singh⁵. However, the population of Jorhat was terribly affected during the days of the Burmese. People fled from Jorhat in all directions. Again a great change in the population structure

of Jorhat took place after the arrival of the British. Colonial penetration into Jorhat also brought peoples like the Marowaris, Bengalis, and tea garden labourers. When British established Purandar Singh as vassal king, he tried his best to restore the population pattern of Jorhat to its earlier days. We are yet to get the detailed record of Purandar Singh's effort. All we can gather from what is available is that when the East India Company installed Purandar Singh as the king granting "Lalbandi" of Upper Assam, he tried to settle the population issue appointing various officers. To carry out royal duties in Southern Jorhat, Purandar Singh created four posts, Buruk Baruah, Tipomiya Baruah, Khangia Baruah and Hati Baruah, and appointed officers in those posts along with land grants⁶.

The intra-territorial migration to Jorhat in different periods of time was mainly associated with religious institution. When a 'sattra' (religious institution of Assam) used to shift from one place to another the people who were closely related with the institution also migrate along with it. The history of the 'sattras' and the migration are not yet thoroughly studied. After the first Moamariya revolution, the 'Satradhikar' (Head priest) of 'Kansopar Majthai Sattra' shifted with the disciples and settled in southern Jorhat⁷. There is no remnant of the 'sattra' now left but the age old plot is still known as 'gosain bari'. During the period of Burmese invasion in 1820 A D few disciples of 'Kansopar Ujanithai Sattra' came from Dubaritoli of Nagaon and settled in Jorhat⁸. Many little known 'sattras' which were scattered in and around Jorhat such as 'Adhar Satra' of Caokhat, 'Owa Sattra' of Baligaon, 'Kathiyatali Sattra' of Potiya gaon, 'Kath Bapu Sattra' of 'Karanga, 'Soraibanhi Sattra', 'Sensa Sattra', 'Korchung Sattra', 'Khutiapota Sattra' etc shifted to Jorhat in different times. Systematic and detail study of the history of 'sattra's will throw new light to the history of the migration to Jorhat.

Another important migration to Jorhat was the migration of Muslims from the west. The Turk and Afghan origin people were collectively known as the 'Garya' in Assam. Proper identification of their Turkish or Afgan origin is difficult without genetic mapping of their blood. Many of the Afghans even got converted into Hindu and were ordained as 'Kayastha' class⁹. The impact of Turkish attack under Bakhtier Khilji in 1205 AD was limited to Lower Assam only. So the 'Turk' settled

in Assam, coming with Bakhtiar Khilji were originally confined to Lower Assam. In 1532 AD, an Afghan general named Turbak was killed in a campaign against the Ahoms. Later the war prisoners of his army were settled in areas surrounding Jorhat such as Naobaicha, Kakojan Mohbandha by the Ahom king Suhungmung¹⁰. In course of time they were known as the 'Mariya's. The army of Mirzumlah comprised of Turks, Iranians, Afghan, and Rajputs. It is sure that few of these people stayed back in Upper Assam. When 'Momai Tumauli Barbaruah' was arranging the villages in Ahom kingdom, he established at least two 'Gariya' families in every village¹¹. In accordance to that few 'Gariya's had possibly came to Jorhat. King Pratap Singh and Rudra Singh also, during their reign, settled many people of Turk and Afghan origin who were technically skilled professionals¹². There are still many 'Gariya' families in the outskirts of Nimati area. They fled from that area after the Assamese army was defeated by Burmese in the battle of Mohgarh (Kokilamukh) in 1822 AD. Since then the place is known as 'Gariyabhaga'. Likewise, names like "Griyabari" (near Charigaon), Gariyahabi (earlier name of Lohpohiya Tea Estate) etc give us an account of how old is the Gariya settlement in Jorhat¹³. The Gariyas of Balibat in Jorhat are the decedents of "Pharsiparhiya" post established by Ahom kings. Like wise two Gariya families near Macharhat area, were the descendents of Afghans of Rohilakhand who were brought to Jorhat in 1703 AD and were placed as stonecutter (Shilakuti). Bahadur Gaonburha along with the Gariya families of 'Birinashayek' area belonged to the 'Akhorkotiya' family. But it is yet unknown whether they are of Afghan or Turkish origin. Formud Ali, who participated in the 1857 revolt, belonged to 'Gunakotiya' artisan class. The 'Gunakotiya's settled at Gargaon during the reign of Rudra Singh. Later, when the capital was shifted to Jorhat they came and settled at Royal Road¹⁴. The famous ivory artisan of Assam, Fijnoor Gariya of Jorhat belonged to the family of Bakhtar Khanikar¹⁵. Above all 'Joola', 'Darjee', 'Nawab', 'Saiyad', 'Bagh', 'Melmora Hazarika' etc of Turkish or Afghan origin contributed to the development of Jorhat.

Even in British rule also, people belonged to different ethnic origin migrated to Jorhat. Some people migrated from East Bengal in the middle of 19th century for business purpose and later on permanently stayed in 'Dhakapatty'. The tea

garden labours also share a good percentage of the population of Jorhat. Though they have been left behind from the mainstream due to the circumstances; but their contribution towards the Assamese society is undeniable. The first tea garden in Jorhat was established in the year 1853 AD and later in 1892 AD the number of tea gardens rose to 110.

Marwaris are also inhabiting in Jorhat since long. There is mention of a shop by person named Nareng Keyan or Nauranga Ram Kedia in Jorhat during the reign of Purandar Singh . If we take this shop to have existed during the first reign of Purandar, then the shop can be dated back to 1818 AD. Nauranga Ram, the forefather of Jyoti Prasad Agarwala came to Assam in 1811 AD. Whether Nareng Keyan was Nauranga Ram is a matter of discussion and should be thoroughly studied. In 1840 AD, a shop 'Bargola' was started in Jorhat . In 1865 AD, there were 160 shops in Jorhat and among them 28 were owned by Marwari businessmen . A few Sikh and Bengali families also came to Jorhat for the purpose of business during the colonial period. Some Bengali Hindus were settled in the area which is known as 'colony' at Lichubari near Jorhat city. They migrated during the Bimala Prasad Chaliha's term as chief minister of Assam. At that time the whole area was full of dense forest and was known as 'refugee colony'.

Conclusion

From the prehistoric times till to the colonial rule Jorhat was a melting point of migrant people coming from different places carrying their own socio-cultural heritage. However, due to a sudden geological change after the 11th century Jorhat became swampy and unfit for human settlement. However, embankments and canals were constructed mainly by the Ahoms and by the 16th century again we have witnessed large scale migration to Jorhat. The present day demographic as well as socio-cultural composition of Jorhat is basically an outcome of a long drawn process of human migration. An interdisciplinary approach to migration study can further widen our understanding of the different layers of the history of Jorhat as well as Assam.

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