



Fishing, migration, and settlement: a study of Kaibartas in Majuli Island, Assam

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Abstract

According to the United Nations, a migrant is any person or community who moves from a place, they are otherwise accustomed to dwell in. Keeping this definition in mind, it can be said that there was/were no sons of the soil; rather all soil was barren at a certain period of time, which flourished with the relocation and resettlement of humans. Coming to the community of Kaibartas and boatmen, it is evident from various archaeological sources like Tezpur Rock Inscription, Guwahati Copper Plate, Pushpabhadra grant that they existed in ancient Kamrupa. However, through this paper, an attempt has been made to refer to a section of Kaibartas who settled in Majuli a few centuries back. Data has been collected through field survey, however, since it traces the history, secondary historical sources have also been used for the purpose. Findings suggest that the pattern of migration of the referred section of Kaibartas was unintentional.

Keywords Kaibartas · Kamrupa · Fishing · Migration · Majuli

1 Introduction

Migration and settlement of humans have never been new phenomena in the world. Right from the stone age, human predecessors lived on hunting, they migrated from place to place in search of food. They learned the domestication of animals, farming and gradually settled down. The evolutionary process led to early human settlements. The discoveries of human fossils and evidence of human settlements at various places helped humans to understand human migration from the beginning of time. The migration involved the use of waterways; and boats as the means of movement. Even now, humans migrate. According to the United Nations Migration Agency, a migrant is “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a

state away from his/her habitual place of residence” (United Nations, 2022) (Fig. 1).

The agency (United Nations, 2022) further holds that, the movement is regardless of-

- (1) the persons legal status
- (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary
- (3) what the causes for the movement are
- (4) what the length of the stay is

Accordingly, if any person or community moves from a place, they are otherwise accustomed to dwelling in, that person is a migrant. There are thus no “sons of the soil” (Cote & Mitchell, 2015) rather all soil was barren at a certain period of time, which flourished with the relocation and resettlement of humans. This applies not only to the Ahoms who migrated to Assam with Sukapha as the beginner in 1298 CE but also to the community under study, the Kaibartas, who migrated to the island at a certain point in time. However, the existence of Kaibartas in ancient Kamrupa is evident from Tezpur rock inscriptions.

2 Objectives

- (1) To explore if there is any evidence of the existence of Kaibartas in ancient Kamrupa.

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Fig. 1 A Kaibarta fishing using the net in Majuli. *Source:* A field survey in Majuli Island in February 2020

- (2) To explore how the Kaibartas have migrated to Majuli Island, Assam.

3 Methodology

Methods used to write this paper include both historical methods as well as the use of primary sources. Apart from secondary sources like books and articles, archaeological sources have also been used to find the existence of Kaibartas and boatmen in ancient Kamrupa. However, to understand the migration pattern of the community, they have been interviewed personally with the help of an interview schedule. Hence, a field survey was conducted for this.

4 Brahmaputra river system and location of Majuli Island

The Brahmaputra is the largest river in Assam (Baruah & Roy Choudhury, 1999). It originates at 30° 31' N latitude and 80° 10' E longitudes in the area of *Tamchok Khambala Chorten* near Kubiangiri between the Kailash Range in the north and the Himalayan range in the south (Baruah & Roy Choudhury, 1999, p. 24). The origin lies at the altitude of 5150 m. in a glacier called *Chema Yungdung* which lies to the south of the lake *Konggyo Tso* (Baruah & Roy Choudhury, 1999, p. 24). Originating from the ranges of Kailash, the river flows through Tibet. It enters India through Arunachal Pradesh and flows through Assam and Bangladesh after which it meets with Ganga and later known as the Padma. From Tibet to the point it merges with the Ganga (Meghna) in Bangladesh, it has a total

length of 2880 km out of which 1700 km falls in Tibet, 920 km in India, and 260 km in Bangladesh (Baruah & Roy Choudhury, 1999). Of the part that descends in India, 720 km gravitates in Assam. The Brahmaputra enters Bangladesh at a place called *Mankachar* after spreading widely around the Garo hills of Meghalaya. It then flows for around 270 km to join the Ganga at Goalando. The Ganga is called the Padma in Bangladesh and the combined water body meets another vast course of water called Meghna, which flows with the same name as it falls into the Bay of Bengal. According to the data given by the Water Resources Department of Assam, the Brahmaputra sub-basin extends over an area of 580,000 sq km lying not only in the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, West Bengal, and Sikkim but also; Tibet (China), Bhutan, and Bangladesh. The river has a maximum depth of 18–20 m during the dry season and 40–50 m during the rainy season. As regards the width of the river, it is 8–12 km at its maximum and 1 km at its minimum in Assam. In the plain areas, the width is found to be at its maximum, but at the rocky and hilly areas of Guwahati and Pancharatna, its width is at its minimum. The approximate average width of the Brahmaputra in Assam is of the order of 5.46 km but the actual width varies from place to place (Fig. 2).

5 Majuli: the river-made Island

Majuli island is located in the river Brahmaputra at 93° 30'–94° 35' E latitude and 26° 50'–27° 10' N longitude (Bhaskar et al., 2010, p. 32). Situated in the north of Jorhat, it is the first island to be made a separate district in the Northeastern state of Assam. The total length and catchment area of Majuli are 2706 km and 580,000 sq km,¹ and the district headquarter is located at Garamur. Administratively, Majuli has 243 villages according to the official website of Majuli island, Government of Assam.² Currently, Majuli island has been declared as the largest river island in the world³ (Guinness World Records, 2016) and is surrounded by three rivers—the Luit & Kherkutia Suti to the north & northeast and northwest extremity; Subansiri and the largest

¹ Geography, Official Website of Majuli District, Government of Assam, <https://majuli.gov.in/information-services/geography>.

² <https://majuli.gov.in/information-services/geography>, Retrieved 20 January 2021.

³ <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/largest-river-island>.



Fig. 2 Aerial view of Majuli. *Source:* Official website of Majuli District, Government of Assam (<https://military-choice.blogspot.com/2020/06/majuli-island-worlds-largest-river-island.html#gsc.tab=0>)

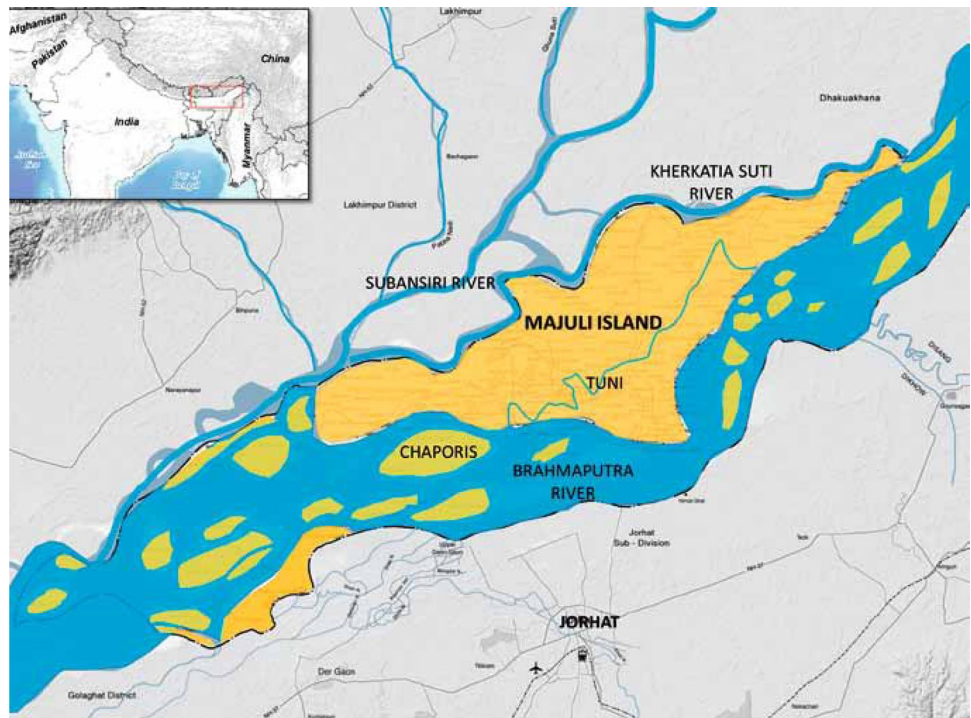
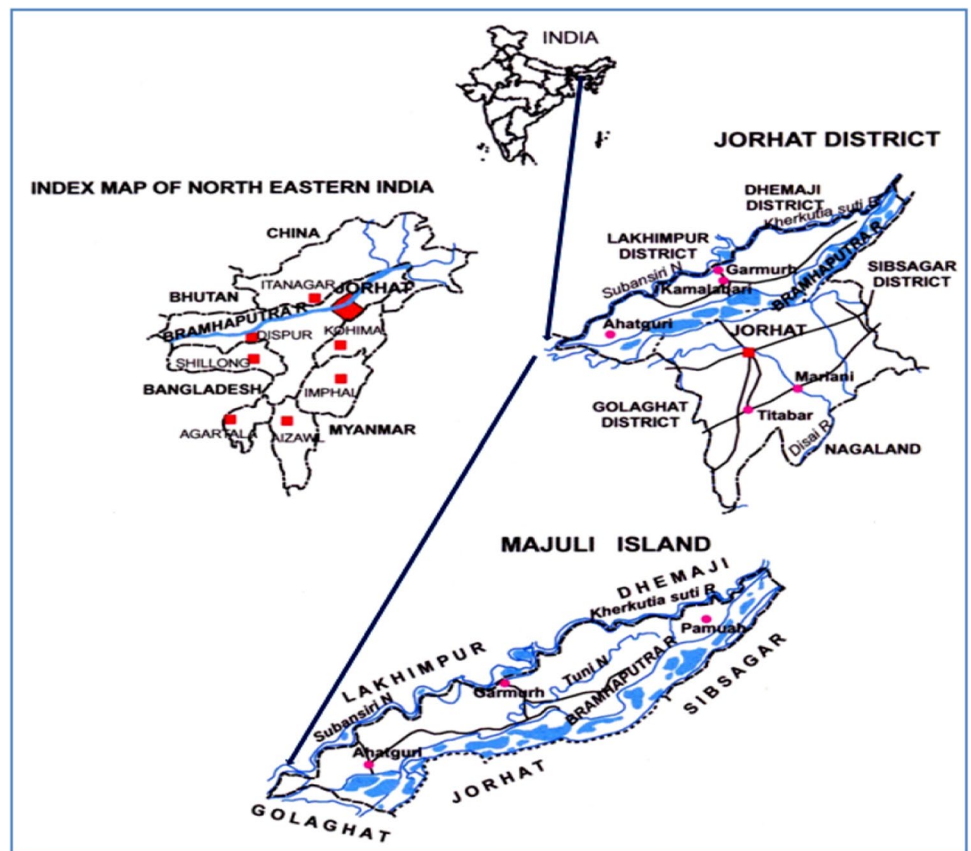


Fig. 3 Location of Majuli Island, Assam. *Source:* Bhaskar et al. (2010, p. 33)



Brahmaputra (Fig. 3). Majuli is a combination of Cluster of islets and there are around 70 beels (Bhaskar et al., 2010, p. 32) and other small rivers like the Tuni river which cuts across the island. It is the geographical location from where sprang the name ‘Majuli’. The term ‘majuli’ means land in the middle of two parallel rivers (Sahariah et al., 2013, p. 16). Past shreds of evidence show that Majuli was a narrow and long piece of land in the seventeenth century (Bhaskar et al., 2010). The two rivers were Brahmaputra flowing in the north and Burhidihing flowing in the south⁴ (Sahariah et al., 2013, p. 16). However, in the years 1661–1696 (Bhuyan, 1968, as cited in Bhaskar et al., 2010) as well as in the 1930s, the island witnessed natural calamities like earthquakes, due to which land map of Majuli have changed to the current one.

6 Kaibartas in ancient Kamrupa: history and etymology

Kaibartas, one of the earliest inhabitants of Bengal (Risley, 1892, p. 376) and significant section of population (Lahiri, 1991, p. 115) in ancient Kamrupa, constitute 31% of Scheduled Castes in present-day Assam as per 2001 census. Etymologically, the origin of the word ‘kaibarta’ or ‘kaivarta’ is debated as Risley pointed out.

Concerning the etymology of the name Kaibartta there has been considerable difference of opinion. Some derive it from ‘ka’, water, and ‘vartta’, livelihood; but Lassen says ‘that the use of ‘ka’ in this sense is extremely unusual in early Sanskrit, and that the true derivation is Kivarta a corruption of Kimrarta, meaning a person following a low or degading occupation. (Risley, 1892, p. 376)

However, regarding the Kaibartas of Majuli, scholars like Nath (2009) opined that Kaivarta is “a Sanskrit word meaning people who live in water, i. e. by boating and fishing” (p. 44). At present, the word Kaivarta or Kaivartta is written as Kaibarta.⁵ Principally there are two main divisions among the Kaibarta community which are based on their occupation (Barman, 2008, p. 17). Those who are associated with cultivation and agriculture are Haloyas and those chiefly associated with fishing are Jaluyas (Lahiri, 1991, p. 115). In the nineteenth century, as Risley (1892) mentioned, they were divided as Haliks or Chasa (in Central Bengal and Malda) and Jaliks or Jalowa or Jaliya or Jeliya or Mala (in Hooghly); Helo and Mecho in Jessore (in present Bangladesh); Halia Das, Parasara Das or Chasi Kaibarta and simply

Kaibarta in Bakarganj (in present Bangladesh) (p. 378). The terms have originated from their literal meanings; Haloya from Bengali word *hal'* which literally means ‘a plough’; the Bengali term *chasa'* literally means a ‘cultivator’; and Jaloya have originated from the Bengali word *jal''* which literally means a ‘fishing net’. Even though several authors (Lahiri, 1991, p. 115; Risley, 1892; Nath, 2009, p. 44) opined that communities like Doms, Nadiyal, Keots are all categorized as Kaibartas, there are clear cut distinctions between the Kaibartas and Keots on one hand and Doms and Nadiyals on the other (Allen, as cited in Dey, 2016, p. 139). Similarly, in Tripura, Malos are considered as Jeliya Kaibartas (Barman, 2020, p. 80), but in West Bengal, they are a different SC sub-caste community from Kaibartas (Barman, 2020, p. 28). Confusion arises because both Malos and Kaibartas have fishing, boating, and agriculture (Chasi Kaibartas) as the occupation. According to Rup Kumar Barman⁶ (2020), Malos has taken this occupation because fishing was no way inferior one in ancient period (Barman, 2020, p. 91). The second reason is the availability of fish of large varieties (Barman, 2020, p. 56); and the third reason is the love of Bengalis to the tasty fishes (Barman, 2020, p. 56). These reasons led several communities to take up fishing as their main occupation.

Barman further writes about the occupation of Malos:

The Malos of precolonial and colonial Bengal had developed a specific folk-culture of their own. As primary and secondary fisherman, captured fishers, fish traders and retailers; Malos had/have a very close relation with the source of their livelihood. The Malos had/have developed their own techniques and technologies particularly in making boats, nets, fishing implements and in fishing techniques. They appeared as expert fishers of Bengal...The Malos had also taken up other professions such as agriculture and boating during the colonial period. (Barman, 2020, p. 29)

Coming to the origin of the Kaibartas, they are believed to have founded five ancient princedoms in the Midnapore district of Bengal, which includes– Tamralipta or Tamluk, Balisita, Turka, Sujamute, Kutubpur (Risley, as cited in Dey, 2016, p. 140). A good proportion of Kaibartas do exist in Bengal too and a legend connects the community with Ballal Sen of the Sen dynasty. In Assam however, Kaibartas existed in ancient times as evident from archaeological sources like inscriptions. Malos are also present in Assam. The Kaibarta community writes surnames mostly in Das but there exist several other surnames too. Some of them include Haloya Das, Sarkar, Mal Das, Parasanna Das used for Chasi Kaibartas. In Majuli, Malos use surnames as Halder and are one of

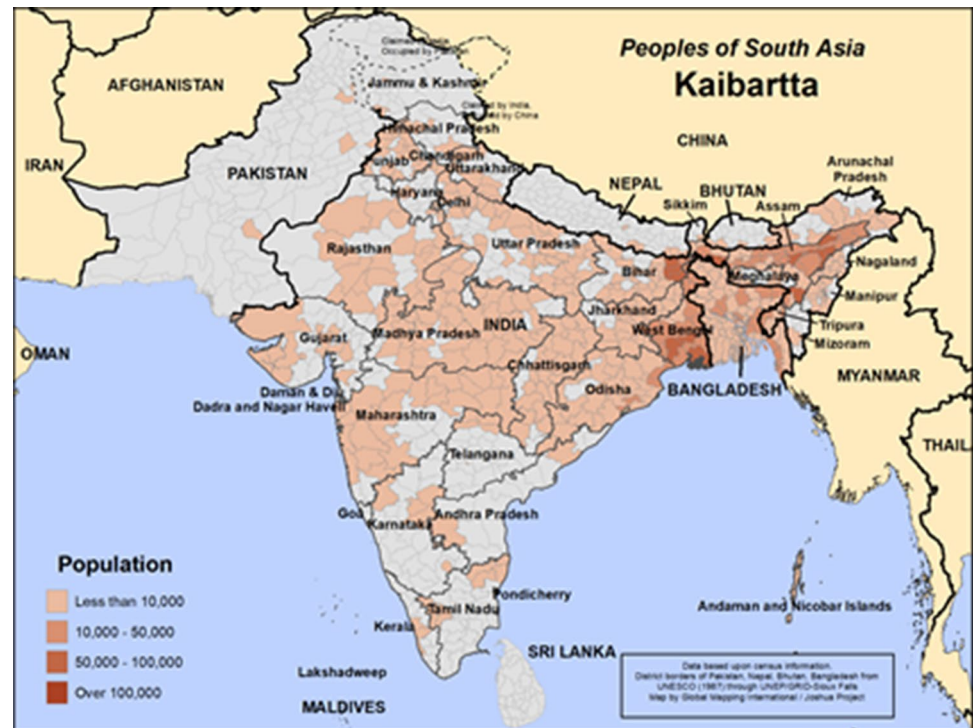
⁴ Majuli The River Island, Retrieved 10 May 2019 from, <http://www.assaminfo.com/tourist-places/1/majuli-the-river-island.htm>.

⁵ As has been found in government documents like Census 2001.

⁶ Prof. Rup Kumar Barman is Professor of History at Jadavpur University, Kolkata.



Fig. 4 Concentration of Kaibartas. Source: Joshua Project (n.d.) <https://joshuaproject.net/assets/media/profiles/maps/m17016.png>



the traditional fisherman communities of Assam apart from the Keots who had taken fishing as the occupation during the colonial period (Assam Buranji, 1830, as cited in Barman, 2008, p. 18).

7 Archaeological evidence of Kaibartas

7.1 Tezpur rock inscription

It is very difficult to find archaeological evidence of any community, or any inscription that is devoted to any community, but fortunately, the Tezpur Rock inscription is written on the Kaibarta community, those involved in fishing and boating. The inscription was found on the banks of the river Brahmaputra at Tezpur in Sonitpur district of Assam. According to the ASI Guwahati circle, the inscription is dated back to CE 829–30 which is during the time span of King Maharajadhiraj Paramesvara Paramabhat-taraka Harjjaravarman (Official Website of ASI, Guwahati circle) of the Salasthamba dynasty. The inscription refers to the Kaivattaras as the *kaivarta-nau(ku) ksi-svabhaksa-sadhani*, literally meaning ‘eater of property in the interior of boats’, obviously referring to their occupation of fishing (Mahanta, 2013). Lines 4–7 of the inscription also refers to the *Naurajjas* who were the boatmen engaged in state service (Mahanta, 2013); *Nau-vandhaka* and *Nau rajjakar* (Barua, 1951, p. 62). According to the ASI Guwahati circle,

the inscription is a royal decree issued for warning fishermen not to cross the area marked for fishing (Official Website of ASI, Guwahati circle, n.d.). It may be the result of some conflict between the fishing boats of common people with the royal boats (Lahiri, 1991), as a result of which, the Naurajja, who is described as the holder of a place named *Nakkajosa* (Lahiri 1991, p. 100) gave a petition to the king to demarcate the areas (Barua, 1951, p. 62). The result was the demarcation as described in the inscription on the banks of the river.

7.2 Gauhati copper plate of Indrapala

The mention of Kaibartas engaged in fishing is also present in the Gauhati copper plate of Indrapala (1058CE) (Ghosh, 2008, p. 161). The plate was written mentioning land donation to Brahmana surrounding water bodies like *bil*, *dirghika*, and *brihad ali* (Ghosh, 2008, p. 162). The plate also mentions that one of the *dirghikas* called Bhoga was owned by the Svalpadyuti Kaivartta for cultivating fish (Ghosh, 2008, p. 162; Ghosh, 2014, p. 214). The *Svalpadyuti Kaivartta* were primarily fishermen having cultivable land in their possession and thus were cultivators too (Ghosh, 2014, p. 217).

7.3 Pushpabhadra grant

Apart from the section of Kaibartas engaged in fishing, there is evidence of Kaibartas engaged in agriculture also. As



Fig. 5 Bangladesh parts under ancient Kamrupa in second century CE. *Source:* Encarta Maps



Mahanta (2013) observed, fishing was not sole occupation of the *kaivattaras*, for they also held land for agricultural purpose as is evidenced by the epigraphs belonging to a later period. The author referred to the Pushpabhadra copper plate inscription of Dharmapala of the Pala dynasty, reigning between 1095 and 1120 CE (Boruah, 2002, p. 191). It is to be mentioned here that apart from the Kaibartas, there were other occupations significant in the social structure of ancient Assam which also included boatmen and potters (Ghosh, 2014, p. 218) (Fig. 4).

8 Fishing, migration, and settlement of the Kaibartas

Migration and settlement of individuals and communities is not an uncommon factor in human evolution across the ages and places. People have migrated and settled, based on the availability of primary sources of survival—food. Initially, jungles and then river banks were the first choice of humans due to the fertility of soil as well as the existence of water. Lahiri (1991) talks about the settlement patterns in ancient Kamrupa, the old name for Assam. Lahiri (1991) holds, between fifth and thirteenth centuries most of the inhabited and cultivated areas lied within the valley of Brahmaputra river or near the various other rivers which were an integral part of the Assam Valley (p. 89). Lahiri explains his standpoint based on the locations of inscriptions found in Assam. During that time, the Kaibartas were an important social group of Kamrupa (Lahiri, 1991, p. 102). Inscriptions (mentioned in the previous section) also justify this claim.

Ancient Pragiyotishpur and Kamrupa have undergone several changes in their boundary specifications from ancient times. According to Baruabhadur (1988), during the Mahabharata war, the time assigned to 1000 BCE (p. 5), Pragiyotisha included the greater part of modern Assam, Jalpaiguri [present day Alipurduar district also], Coochbehar, Rangpur, Bogra, Mymensingh, Dacca, part of Pabna, Tippera and part of East Nepal (Baruabhadur, 1988, p. 2). A description of the external boundaries has also been provided as per Buddhist Jatakas (Baruabhadur, 1988) which says that Pragiyotisha had to its west Kausika river (identified as Kosi), Bhutan hills and part of Nepal to North, Deltic Bengal to South (p. 4) and its East included the hills alongside China (p. 7). In second century CE (see Fig. 5), Kamrupa included present Assam, South Mymensingh, West Sylhet, parts of Comilla, and Noakhali (Ptolemy, as cited in Baruabhadur, 1988, p. 5). Between the fifth and thirteenth century CE, the Western boundary of Kamrupa was the Karotoya river (Ghosh, 2014, p. 208; Lahiri, 1991, p. 14), which presently flows from Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal (partly dried up) to Rangpur and Bogra of present Bangladesh. When Hiuen Tsang visited Kamrupa, in the first half of seventh century CE (Gait, 2008, p. 22), its Southwest boundary was around 200 miles South to Samatata (Eastern Bengal) (Buddhist Records of Western World, Vol II, as cited in Gait, 2008, p. 23); to its, East included the hills alongside China; to West the Karotoya river; which means that seventh-century Kamrupa included present Assam (except Naga hills or present-day Nagaland, Lushai hills or present-day Mizoram and Manipur), part of Mymensingh, North Bengal and Bhutan (Gait, 2008, p. 24).



A later work, the *Yogini Tantra* (Baruabhadur, 1988, p. 7; Gait, 2008, p. 10) describes Kamrupa's boundary as having Dikrang or Dikhow in east; Karotoya river in west; mountains of Kanchana and Girikanyaka (Kunjagiri mountain in Baruabhadur, 1988, p. 7); confluence of river Brahmaputra and river Lakshmi or Lakshya in south. That is, it included roughly the Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan (apart), Rangpur, Kochbehar (Gait, 2008, p. 10) and the Khasi and Garo hills and Northern portion of district Sylhet (Baruabhadur, 1988, p. 7). The present location would thus include, parts of Bangladesh–Rangpur, North Sylhet, Mymensingh towards Southwest, parts of North Bengal–Alipurduar, Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri up to Karotoya river towards West; part of Bhutan towards North, parts of Meghalaya–Khasi and Garo Hills towards South.

About the early settlements, while “Kiratas and Mlechhas” (Baruabhadur, 1988, p. 6) have been mentioned in the Mahabharata itself, Ptolemy also mentioned *Kirrhadia* country, which according to Baruabhadur (1988) was the country of the Kiratas. The location as described by him lies from the foot of the Garo and Khasi hill-tracts of Tippera along the Eastern coast of Brahmaputra estuary (Baruabhadur, 1988, p. 6). Besides the other second century settlements, tribes like Aminakhai, Indaprathai, Ibingai, Damassai, (Dimasas, branch of Kacharis), Nangalokai (Nagas), Kakobai (Kuki), Basanarai, Khalkitis (Kalitas), Barrhai, Indois (Hindus), and Doanai (as cited in Baruabhadur, 1988, p. 6) residing in ancient Kamrupa have also been mentioned by Ptolemy. According to Lahiri (1991), the inscriptions of pre-Ahom Assam from fifth to twelfth century CE were mostly land grants of already settled regions donated to Brahmins who had absolute land tenure rights. Communities and tribes who were settled during that time-period in pre-Ahom Kamrupa were the Brāhmanas, Tantravāyas, *Kaivarttas*, boatmen, potters, weavers, indigenous local groups like the Rabhas and some persons whose occupational status are not referred to owned landed property (Ghosh, 2014, p. 218; Lahiri, 1991, p. 98). However, given the fact that both *Kaivarttas* and *Naukis* are mentioned in the records (Ghosh, 2014, p. 217 Footnote 33), *Kaivartta* may denote fisherfolk and *Nauki* stood for boatmen even though *Kaivarttas* could also be boatmen (Ghosh, 2014, p. 217). But if the inscription meant *Kaibartas* for boatmen, there would not be a separate mention of ‘boatmen’. These boatmen could thus be Keots or Tiyors or any other community who had boating as the caste-based occupation (Barman, 2008, p. 15). The pattern of land holdings were individual and communal (Lahiri, 1991, p. 103); while the boatmen or *naukins* figure individually as holders of land, the *Tantras* (weaver community) and *Kaivartas* always appear in groups (Lahiri, 1991, p. 103). Names of several *Kaibartas* appeared in inscriptions

of ancient Kamrupa, which includes *Naukuksi* found in Tezpur rock inscription (findspot is Darrang district) of Harjaravarman dated to ninth century CE (Lahiri, 1991, p. 115); *Abanci Kaivartta* and *Svalpadyuti Kaivartta* described at the Pushpabhadra copper plates (findspot is Kamrup district) of Dharmapala dated to twelfth century CE (Lahiri, 1991, pp. 115–116); *Nokka* (Ghosh 2014) (boatman), “*Can-denauki, Daksinapatinauki, Sadhavanauki* in eleventh-century grant” (Lahiri, 1991, p. 115).

Majuli was a part of the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa (Nath, 2009, p. 2) and was always an inhabited area although its population density was very thin (Wade, 1927, as cited in Nath, 2009, p. 2). It became a place for Vaishnavism after Srimanta Sankardeva first established a Satra at Belaguri Dhuwahat of Majuli in the fifteenth-sixteenth century (Nath, 2009, p. 2). Boats were the principal modes of communication and transport through the Brahmaputra which has served as a migration route since ancient times. Majuli, having an abundance of unoccupied land, [Majuli] provided shelter to all immigrants coming from all around since the middle ages (Nath, 2009, p. 3). Thus the *Misings* came down from hills (Nath, 2009, p. 4). According to Nath (2009), a segment of Sylhetis came from East Pakistan (p. 4), that is, Bangladesh after partition of India till 1971. There was an influx of *Malos* too in Indian states of Assam, Tripura, West Bengal (Barman, 2020, p. 80). In Majuli, we find a good proportion of *Kaibartas* as well as *Malos*. As some of the *Malo* fishermen of Majuli mentioned, they came from Bangladesh. According to Rup Kumar Barman (2020), *Malos* have their origins in Rajasthan. He noted, “Those who migrated from Rajasthan through the route of Malabar Coast are the *Malos* and those who migrated directly from Jhalwar (Rajasthan) to Bengal are called the *Jhalos*” (Barman, 2020, p. 90).

During interviews with these communities in Majuli, it has been found that the pattern of their migration was different. The fishermen respondents of Majuli remembered that their forefathers came in large *Pansis* boats, the time can be estimated as nineteenth century for a section of them. According to Sir Hunter, in nineteenth century Assam (see Fig. 6), external trade was carried on by up-country or Bengali boats commonly known as *Bajras* and *Pansis* (as cited in Barpujari, 1992, p. 301). In this regard, Barpujari described the river route navigable by country boats: “The Brahmaputra was navigable from Bugwah, a few miles from Rangpur, to Dibrugarh for about 450 miles. A voyage downstream from Goalpara to Calcutta ordinarily took a month by country boat and upstream about a week more” (Barpujari, 1992, p. 301). That is, for the *Kaivartta* boatmen of Jessore (Fig. 7), located in West of Bangladesh,



Fig. 6 Map of Assam in 1874. Source: Barpujari, H.K, Vol IV, p. 258

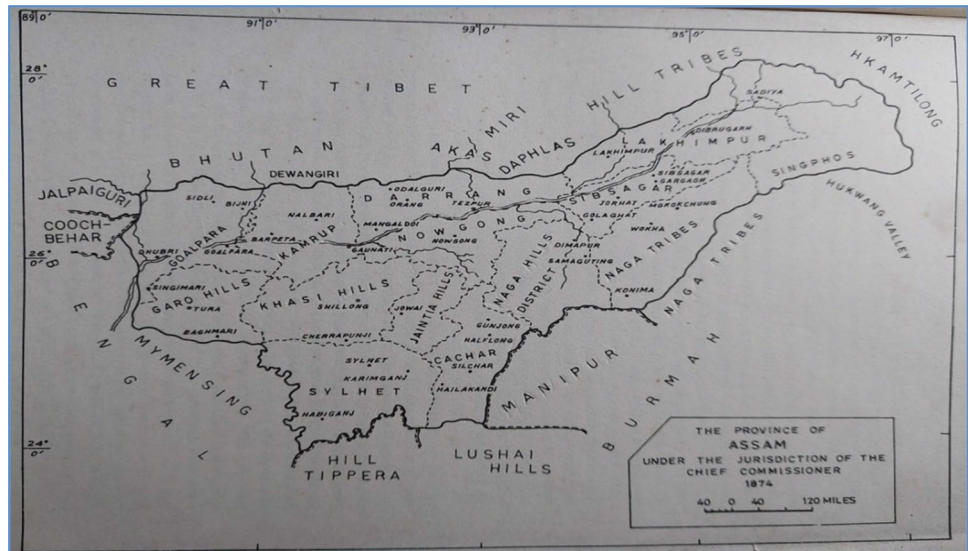
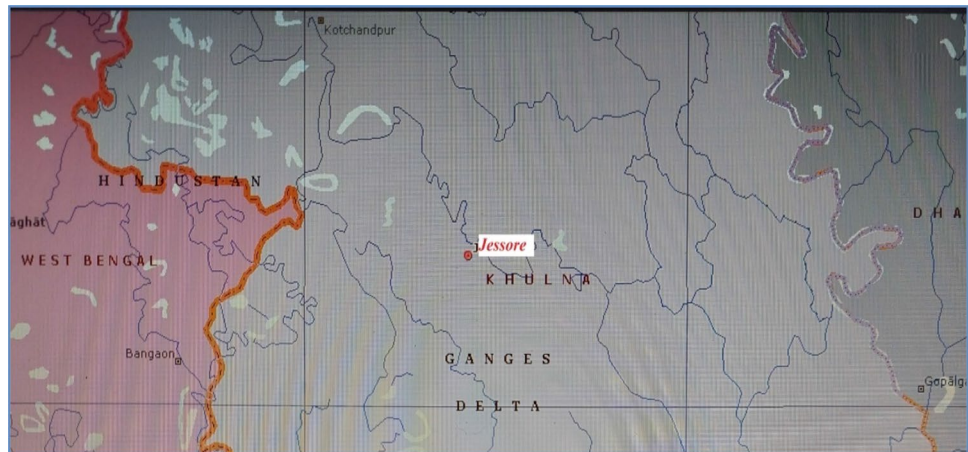


Fig. 7 Rivers across Jessore district (present day Bangladesh). Source: Encarta Maps



who settled at Majuli, it took around 37–38 days of voyage upwards through connecting rivers towards the Brahmaputra by country boat like *Pansis*. The Brahmaputra originates in Tibet region, 920 km of which falls in India (720 km in Assam and rest in Garo hills) and 260 km falls in Bangladesh where it falls into the river Padma moving Southwest.

Even though the Kaibartas had taken this route to reach Majuli, nature of their settlement was not intentional, rather a gradual process, over a longer time. As per their traditional occupation, they (older generations) did fishing and earned a livelihood by selling the fish. They navigated far away in the middle of the river to catch fish and returned home on completion. After years of settlement in this way, they observed that the amount of fish they caught was lowered. They proceeded a bit far from that location and continued fishing. A time came when the location to catch fish became far from

their place of family settlement, at that point, they decided for resettlement in a locality from where they could catch fish from both directions. The relocation was such that the family resettlement area was located somewhere at the center of a line, from where they could do fishing at both Northern and Southern directions of the river. It is not sure, if they relocated to some other place in Bangladesh, or not, but they did move upwards. The first district they encountered was Dhubri (earlier Dhubri and Goalpara were togetherly called as Goalpara) (Fig. 8). So, the Kaibartas stayed at a place called Gouripur (Fig. 9) in the previous Goalpara district (located presently at Dhubri). Gouripur is located at the Northern bank of river Brahmaputra in present Assam. Their resettlement at Gouripur was for a generation or two,⁷ where they continued with their

⁷ Interviewee is not sure about the exact time, but he was sure about the stay at Gouripur.



Fig. 8 River route from Jessore to Dhubri and vice versa.
 Source: Encarta Maps

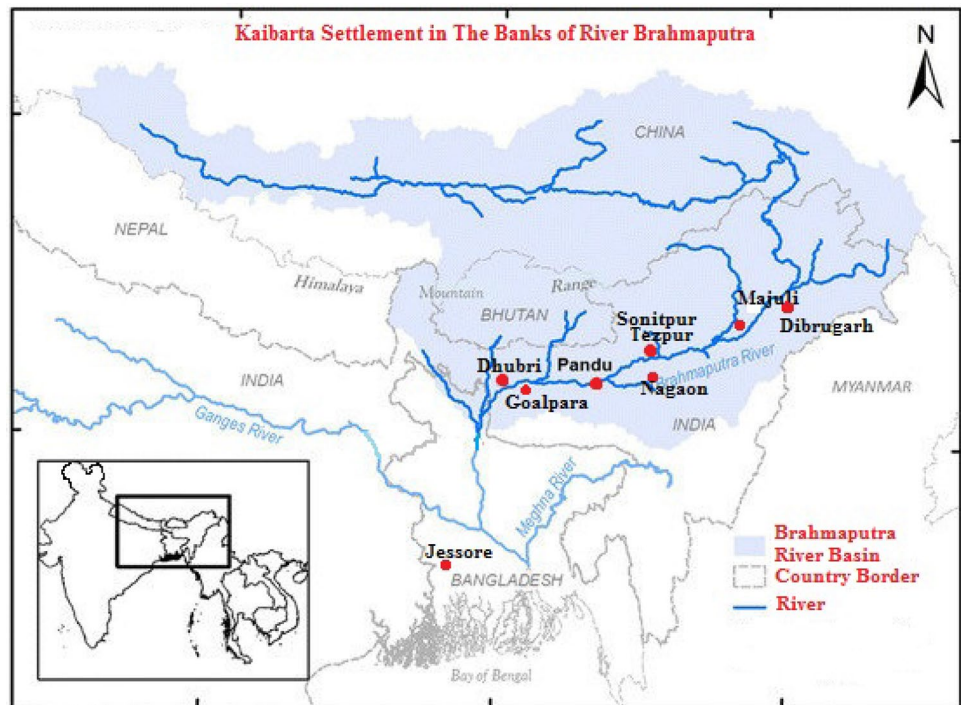
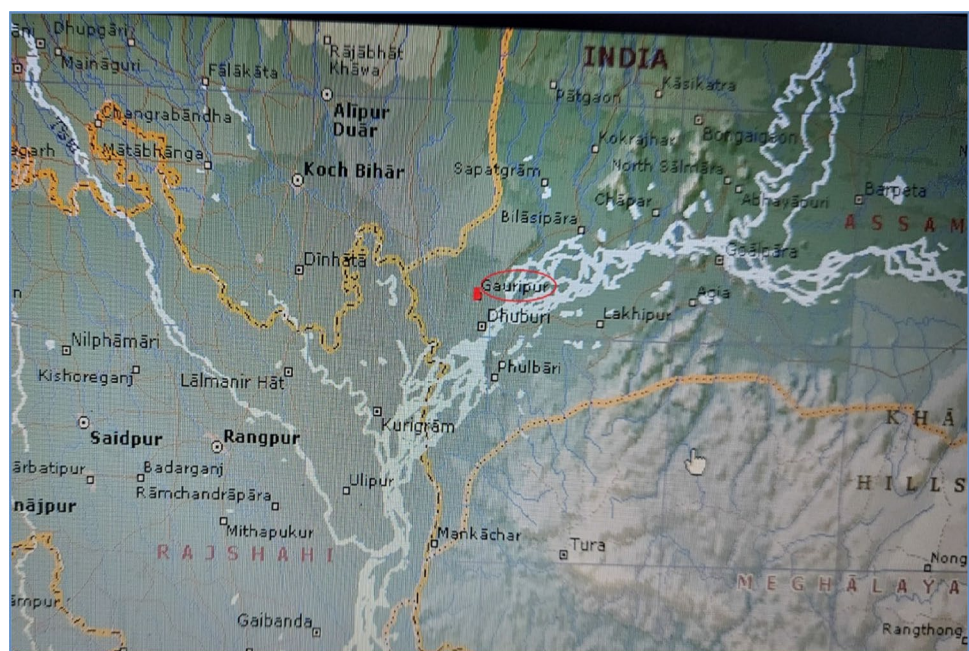


Fig. 9 Location of Gauripur in the bank of Brahmaputra.
 Source: Encarta Maps



occupation of fishing. They earned their livelihood, till the time they felt to move upwards towards the northeast direction. Some of the Kaibarta community people stay at Gouripur even today. However, for those who move upwards towards the Brahmaputra river, they finally resettled at different places of Majuli around four or five generations back, even though the Kaibartas belong to the early group of settlers of the region (Nath, 2009, p. 44). For many of those who came a

little late, some did settle in Majuli and some moved to nearby districts moving further upwards towards the river. Kaibartas are found in almost all places of Majuli and several places of Assam. The community is concentrated in some specific villages like Sensowa in Nagaon district; Kharjan and Nagaogaon in Dibrugarh district; and Dhekiajuli in Sonitpur district (Nath, 2009, p. 44). Jelia Kaibartas are concentrated in Lower Assam (Barman, 2008, p. 18); and Malos in Cachar, Goalpara,



Dhubri and Barpeta districts (Barman, 2020, p. 80) of Assam. In Majuli, Kaibartas are concentrated in Salmara, Kakarikata, Chilakala, Kamlabari, Garamur and Dakhinpat (Nath, 2009, p. 44); apart from Dhulabari, Barkhola at Majuli, Milan Chapri, Manik Chapri, Modhupur, Bali Chapori, Paboripota, Pabna gaon. There are around 340 families of Kaibartas in Kakarikata gaon alone (Personal Interview with a Kaibarta boatman in Majuli). The community got settled in different villages of Majuli mainly due to three reasons:

- (1) Majuli had an abundance of unoccupied land.
- (2) Rivers provided abundant fish and fertile land was used for cultivation purposes.
- (3) Since Majuli was situated in the middle of the river Brahmaputra, it was safe from other tribes of the region.

To elaborate, in a study (Bhaskar et. al., 2010, p. 31) on the fertility of Majuli's soil conducted a decade back, it has been found that 35% of the area could be suitable for cultivation as against the current practice of 7%. The study also claimed that at present, Majuli is one of the largest inhabited river islands of the world covering 92,460 ha that supports a population of 135,378. That is in the recent past, only 7% of the land was cultivated by 15.5% of the total population in the Jorhat district of Assam which was equivalent to Majuli's total population in 2010. It is thus obvious that there was abundance of fertile land around two centuries back when Majuli was still sparsely populated.

9 Occupational fluidity of Kaibartas in Majuli

Occupational fluidity is not uncommon in Assam, nor was it in ancient Kamrupa. While at present times, Kaibartas and boatmen are also engaged in cultivation; in ancient Kamrupa also it did happen as noted by Lahiri (1991): Most of the boatmen also held land, and therefore, while plying their boats, in all probability also took up cultivation. This is significant evidence of the fluidity of occupational divisions (p. 116). The Kaibartas at Majuli write their surnames as *Halder*, *Sarker*, and *Mal Das*. Those who write *Mal Das* are mostly found near Kamlabari satra of Majuli. Although traditionally this group of Kaibartas is engaged with farming and agriculture, they also do fishing. In this regard, Risley (1892) pointed out that Kaibartas are the chief curers of fish in Eastern Bengal. They work during November and December, when fish are most abundant and the weather is cool (p. 381).

In Majuli, fishing is continued throughout the year except for the rainy season. The Kaibartas work in fields during the daytime. When it's night, they take their boats and go to the

river for fishing. They stay there whole night and catch as many fish as they can. When it's dawn, they return home and sleep and then get ready to go into the fields. This cycle continues every day till the rain begins. During rains, Assam is flooded every year. Majuli, being an island in the river Brahmaputra, is also exceedingly affected during the rainy season when the river water crosses the safety limit. Riverbank erosion is also a major issue. Hence during heavy rains from March to July, fishing is restricted in the river. During these months the fisherman and boatmen are stopped from any activities relating to the river.

10 Food habit and rituals of the Kaibartas in Majuli

The Kaibartas, like the other Bengalis, eat thrice a day with a morning tea in addition. At around 7 in the morning, they have their first cup of tea with *moori* (puffed rice) or *chira* (rice flakes). They have their breakfast at around 10. For breakfast, they like to eat rice with either fish or vegetables, dal or meat, or a combination of any of these. In meats, they don't eat pork. Pork is taken by Assamese and tribals like Missing but Hindu Bengalis do not eat it. The same pattern of food habit is followed in lunch with slight variations as per taste. Although their staple food is rice, they sometimes have dinner with *roti* also. Even though the staple cereal remains the same, in dinner they have *khichuri*, a dish made with rice and lentils mixed. Besides these food habits, they also eat *pithas* during festivals which they prepare with rice flour, *til* and *gur*.

Magh Bihu is celebrated in Majuli, and the Kaibartas also celebrate the festival with various types of *pitha*. They follow Vaishnavism which is the main religion followed by the people of Majuli. There are Satras in Majuli which are sort of prayer halls, started with the influence of Srimanta Sankardeva who stayed in Majuli preaching Vaishnavite principles. Their daily puja ritual is called *Guru puja* which is worshipping Radha Krishna and Gopal. They also worship Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth daily. The other Hindu Gods and Goddesses, they worship occasionally are Shitali Maa, Lakshmi, Kali, Shiva, and Satyanarayan.

Coming to the specific customs and ritual patterns of the Kaibartas which are associated with rivers and boats, Goddess Ganga is their main Goddess. They worship the goddess once a year. The rituals are carried out at the river side and not at home. Their association with water makes them worship the rivers and beels. They have also given names to the River Gods. Just as there is Goddess Ganga associated with the river Ganges, the Kaibartas of Majuli call the rivers Brahmaputra and Tuni as *Brahmaputra Baba*, *Tuni Baba* positing as Gods. This might be due to the dangerous face of the rivers during the rainy season. Also, drowning in the river may be another reason, the fear of which made them believe in the rivers as Gods and Goddesses.



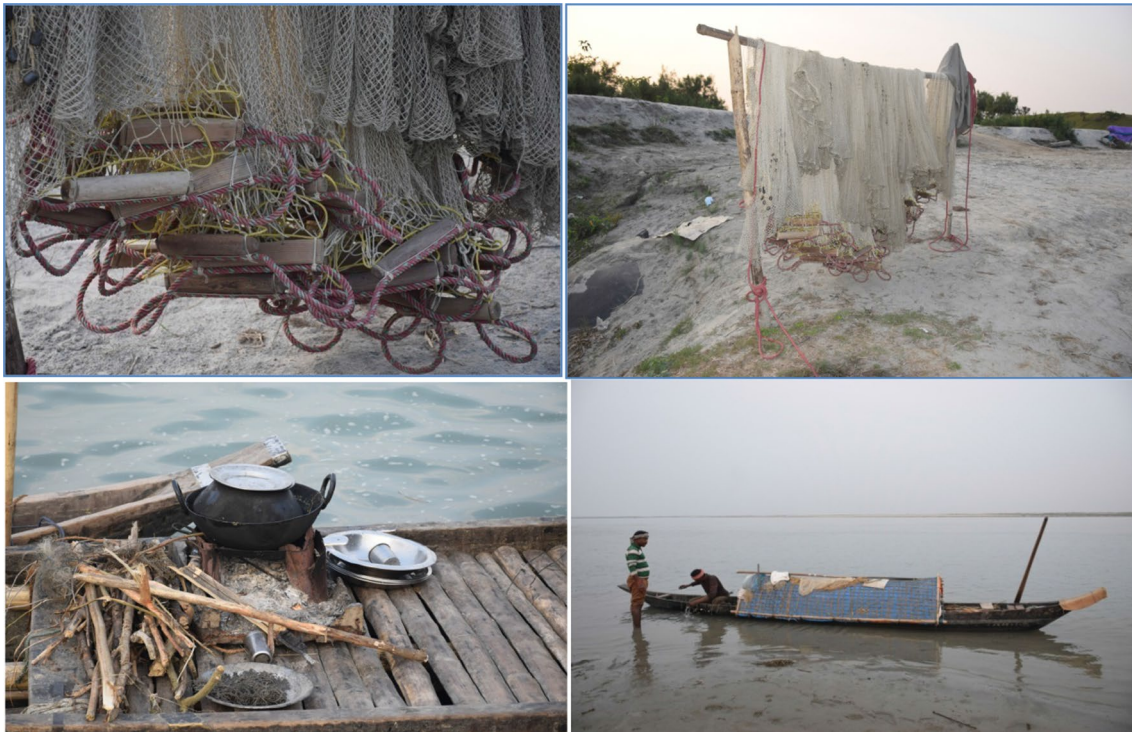


Fig. 10 Life of the Kaibartas in Majuli. *Source:* Field survey in Majuli Island in February 2020

Apart from boatmen and fishermen, those Kaibartas who build boats worship Vishwakarma, the divine architect.

11 Conclusion

Majuli has witnessed the settlement of different communities at different points in time. So far as the Kaibarta community, they are one of the early groups of settlers to ancient Kamrupa who were engaged in fishing as well as agriculture. In Majuli, the section of Kaibartas who are the subject of this paper have migrated most probably around the nineteenth century through their country boats called *pansies*. It was not intentional, rather a gradual process. Occupationally, they were not only fishermen but boatmen too because for fishing in the river they had to row the boat and the activity was carried out in groups. Ever since their settlement in Majuli, they lived on fishing and farming due to the abundance⁸ of fertile land in Majuli. Currently, they are in extreme poverty with 90% of them living from hand to mouth (Nath, 2009, p. 45). According to Nath, the decline of fishing business in Majuli and scarcity of agricultural land for cultivation are the main reasons for the poor economic status of the Kaivartas of

Majuli (2009, p. 45). Their educational status is also very poor. Furthermore, the construction of a bridge connecting Majuli with Jorhat may lead to more decline in the fishing business. At the same time, it may raise wage earning among the people of Majuli or shift of occupation (Fig. 10).

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⁸ Fertile land was abundant centuries back when they first came to the island and settled.



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