

**An Ethnographic Study
Of
The Singpho Community in Assam**

Submitted by:



**Institute Of
Research & Documentation
Of Indigenous Studies**

**Lalit Kala Bhawan, Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra
Panjabari, Guwahati-781037
www.irdis.org**

Sponsored by:

**Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes
Jawaharnagar, Khanapara, Guwahati-781022**

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Preface

The project on 'An Ethnographic study on the Singpho community of Assam' has been carried out by the Institute of Research and Documentation of Indigenous Studies, Assam, under the aegis of the Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes of Assam, AIRTSC, Khanapara, Assam.

The field study for the project has been conducted by IRDIS in partnership with the members of the Singpho community within the community premises in the Tinsukia district of Assam. The women and the menfolk of the Singpho community, the youth and the community elders, all extended full support and guidance and provided all the information that was necessary for the successful completion of this project.

Ethnography Study refers to a qualitative study or research which aims at providing a detailed and an in-depth description of everyday life and practices of a particular community which also encompasses their culture as well as their social and traditional values. The state of Assam, being home to a multitude of ethnic communities, presents a colourful mosaic of race and ethnicity. Each of these ethnic communities is unique with regard to their ways of living, cultural, social and traditional practices. The history related to their migration to the area of their present inhabitation unfurls interesting historical facts apart from giving a fair idea about the social and cultural dimensions as well as their geographical boundaries in the past and present. An ethnographic study on these various aspects of a particular community/communities can bring out valuable information and interpretations with regard to their culture, social traditions and beliefs, family life and livelihood, spirituality and to many historical events. Such a study would, besides documenting their historical and socio-cultural background, foster better relations and understanding between the communities themselves and also with societies outside theirs.

The project has been carried out by the IRDIS team lead by the undersigned as the Project Director in collaboration and partnership with the senior and experienced members of the Singpho community who have been associated with the socio-cultural activities and preservation of culture, traditions and customs of the community. The Project Director along with the team of senior members of the Singpho community have guided the field workers to collect information on various topics of the ethnographic study in consultation with the members of the community in remote villages in community locations. Most of the information on history, traditional customs, beliefs and traditional knowledge have come

down from ancient times through inter-generational oral communication and through traditional practices within the community. Workshops were held to brief and guide the field workers on the collection of information and data on the various aspects of the Ethnographic study. A team leader was appointed from within the community to supervise the progress of fieldwork. As photographs are an essential and indispensable part of an ethnographic study, the responsibility for collection of photographs related to social, cultural and traditional events was also delegated to a photography team. Secondary research has been conducted by consulting documented facts on the Singpho community from various books, journals and file notings.

The main features of the Ethnographic Study carried out on the community, besides others, are given below:

1. The history of the community till present times. Their original place of habitation to the different routes of migration to their final settlements in Assam will be documented.
2. Their personal and community characteristics. Aspects of life.
3. Their present locations of habitation, the names of the villages, districts, the terrain, climatic conditions, their population numbers.
4. Their socio economic status, their modes of livelihood with respect to the elderly members, youth and womenfolk.
5. Details of their main livelihood, whether agrarian, self-employed, working in the public or private sectors, or employed in industrial establishments.
6. Their system of housing and architecture
7. Their Culture, different traditions and traditional knowledge.
 - 7.1 Traditions: their religion, festivals, beliefs, birth, customs and traditions related to birth, wedding and death.
 - 7.2 Traditional knowledge: About traditional medicines, conservation of environment through traditional beliefs and customs for their survival, traditional skills .
 - 7.3 Craft and handicrafts, ethnic costumes, weaving, knowledge of natural dyeing, jewellery making, art and crafts related to life and livelihood such as cultivation, hunting, storing of food and food grains, and their cooking methods.
 - 7.4 Ethnic methods of livelihood, agrarian, hunting, etc.
 - 7.5 Food habits... their cuisine, the nature of food, its preparation, utensils and mode of cooking. Any religious beliefs and traditions attached to it.
8. Changes that have taken place in: lifestyle, socio-economic status, population number, livelihood, health issues, education, gender issues, ethnic traditions and beliefs, costumes. To find if the changes are due to climatic changes, influence of the world, due to people going out work etc.
9. Their opinions, identity assertions and their reasons.

The fieldwork information and data collected were mainly in the Assamese and Singpho scripts. Assistance was sought from interpreters from both languages for translation into English. The information and data collected was cross checked with the senior members of the community for authentication of the collected material. The primary research done through the field workers was also co-related to the secondary research from books, journals, file notings etc, depicting the Singpho community. The seven chapters of the study depict various subjects related to the ethnographic study done on the Singpho communities with the display of pictures in most chapters to assist the reader in visualizing the rich cultural, social and traditional values associated with this great community.

The different chapters covering the ethnographic study of the community include various aspects of the Singpho society viz. their history, routes of migration along with their relationship with the colonial regime depicting both conflict and co-operation; traditional culture and social mores; weaves and crafts, folk dances and music, customs, traditional knowledge of vernacular architecture, knowledge of traditional medicinal plants, herbs etc and the methods of scientific and healthy cuisine; festivals and religion; natural resources and their forms of livelihood and challenges faced by them as a society.

This ethnographic study give a comprehensive overview of the Singpho society and the juxtaposition of great cultures, traditions and values which were ingrained in the community itself from time immemorial and which the society itself by dint of their efforts has been able to preserve and revive the ones that face extinction.

The Singpho society, which is rich in culture, history, social beliefs and customs, oral traditions, folklore and traditional knowledge, has been studied in this initiative with the main goal of bringing to light the ethnographic features of the community. A brave and a warlike tribe, they belong to the Tibeto Burman Linguistic group and although they were originally animists they gradually embraced the teachings of Theravada Buddhism. Certain changes have taken place in the cultural and religious beliefs with the conversion to Buddhism. They no longer... served as their community drink rather than the traditional rice beer and it has had an overall sobering effect on this brave and war-like community.

The community faces the threat of population decline. This could be attributed, besides other reasons, to population decline due to displacement, loss of land, change of demography, and change of geographical boundaries and also the problem of opium addiction that the community faces since the colonial days to this day. In spite of their declining population and various challenges that the Singpho society faces, the fact that the community has been successful in keeping their rich culture, traditional beliefs, social customs and traditional knowledge vibrantly alive to this day can be attributed to the cohesiveness of the community and their instinct for resurgence and revival.

The information and data collected through the field work and through oral communication with the knowledgeable persons of the Singpho community specially with very senior and respected members of the community such as Bisa Nong Singpho and Bhupeswar Ningda have been, have been compiled and edited by the undersigned in a book form with the help of translators. This project report has delved into a wide category of topics related to the ethnography of the Singpho community. However, due to the constraints of the time allotted for the project, certain areas that require indepth research and analysis could not be accomplished in the manner desired. The undersigned would welcome readers to point out any errors that may have inadvertently crept into the content of the project report for rectification. On behalf of the Institute of Research and Documentation of Indigenous Studies, I sincerely hope that the efforts that have gone into this research and study and its documentation will be of help to researchers and social scientists and inspire them to delve deeper into the details of the ethnographic study of the one of the greatest communities of the North-eastern region of Assam-the 'Singpho Community'.

Dr. Deepa Dutt
Executive Director
Institute of Research & Documentation of Indigenous Studies
Panjabari, Guwahati-37
www.irdis.org

Dated : 10th May 2015
Guwahati

Acknowledgement

On behalf of the Institute of Research & Documentation of Indigenous Studies, I convey my sincere gratitude to the Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, AIRTSC, Govt. of Assam, for extending support and financial assistance to implement the project entitled "An Ethnographic Study on the Singpho community of Assam". I convey my sincere thanks to Shri Udayan Hazarika ACS, Director AIRTSC for going through the draft report of the study and for his valuable suggestions. My thanks also go out to Shri Ganesh Kakati, Joint Director AIRTSC who has always been with me through out the duration of the project and extended his unstinted support.

My gratitude to all the members of the Singpho community of the Tinsukia district of Assam for your support, encouragement, advice and guidance in conducting this study and research on the project Without your wholehearted co-operation such an endeavour would not have been possible.

To Shri Bisa Nong Singpho, the Chief of the Singpho community, I pay my respects and gratitude for being personally present at the first meeting and workshop that was held at Ketetong to flag off the project and inspiring the project team and also for monitoring the progress of the project. His contribution to the project is acknowledged with gratitude.

I convey my thanks to Shri Rajib Ningkhee for monitoring and taking the field work team under his wings to encourage and guide them in this initiative. For taking a personal interest in capturing the photographs of the cultural and social events of the community on site, my thanks to him for being available on all occasions when we needed help in taking the project forward.

My sincere appreciation and gratitude go out to the field work team headed by Nongpion Gunggi of Inthem village and assisted by Nongdin Gudung of Inthem village and Brang Lot Urang of Ketetong village in conducting the field work to collect information, material and data related to the Ethnographic Study and submitting their reports within the scheduled deadlines.

A special word of thanks to Shri Bhupeswar Ningda, Shri Manjela Singpho, Shri Rajesh Singpho and Smt. Protima Singpho for their continued support to IRDIS and their contributions to the Project.

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My thanks also go out to Shri Seng Buragohain, and to Shri Mrinmoy Baishy and Shri Nur Muhammad for their assistance in translating and typing out respectively substantial segments of the report.

Dr. Deepa Dutt
Project Director
'An Ethnographic Study on the Singpho Community of Assam'
Guwahati

DECLARATION

This is to certify that the present work 'An Ethnographic Study on the Singpho Community of Assam' is an original undertaking by the Institute of Research & Documentation of Indigenous Studies, IRDIS, under the aegis of Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, Jawaharnagar, Khanapara, Guwahati-22.

The report in part or in full has not been published or submitted to any other forum.

Sd/-

Dr. Deepa Dutt

Executive Director

Institute of Research & Documentation

of Indigenous Studies

Panjabari, Guwahati-781037

Dated : 10th May 2015

Guwahati

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All these ethnic groups are spread over Myanmar, the eastern part of Assam along the Brahmaputra River, Arunachal Pradesh and North Burma, the Yunnan District of China and Thailand. Till the present day they all have managed to stay in touch with each other although scattered over different regions and countries. The Singphos have five Clans viz. Marip, Lahraw, Lahpai, N-Hkum and Maran.

- (1) Gam (The first born) : Rawang Ethnic group
- (2) Nong (Second born) : Lisu Ethnic group
- (3) Long (Third born) : Maru Ethnic group
- (4) Dung (Fourth born) : Lasi Ethnic group
- (5) Tang (Fifth born) : Jingpho or Singpho ethnic group
- (6) Yawng (Sixth born) : Aatosi Ethnic group
- (7) Khang (Seventh born) : Naga or Chin Ethnic group
- (8) Soroi (Eight born) : Oka or Wa ethnic group

Singphos as we know them today viz:

The Singphos believe that their origins go back to a place called ' Mejoi Singra Bum' in Tibet and that from this place the tribe spread all over the world. According to the Singpho legend or "Joiba" the place Majoram Singra Bum finds mention and also that one Ningam Wa varied a crocodile and their progeny went on to form the many ethnic groups of the northeast part of India. This fact finds mention in the Singpho history of China. In the year 100 BC the Singphos came down stream along the Tsangpo River and entered the Tibet plateau in the period from 800 to 700 BC and lived in this region for hundreds of years. According to one historical version, the Singpho migrated from Mongolia to the courage. The word Singpho itself denotes a 'human being' and they are known for their bravery and further into the varied mosaic of its culture, society and livelihood patterns. It is important therefore to go into the community's historical past before one begins to delve its culture and its socio-cultural aspects have not till today been adequately documented. It is historical past. However inspite of their rich traditions, the community's life and livelihood, The Singphos are known as one of the most prominent of tribes in Assam with a rich

The Singphos – A Historical Perspective

Chapter I

The Singphos are known by different names in different places. In Assam they are known as the Singphos. In Myanmar they identify themselves as Kachin. In China they are known as Jingphaw. Although they are divided by geographical boundaries, they have been successful in forging cohesiveness in so far as their linguistic and culture traditions are concerned. The Singphos have migrated to different regions of the world yet they consider China, Myanmar and India to be the places connected to their roots. In Myanmar the Jingphaw, Maru, Lasi, Aatsi, Lisu and Rabang communities have been clubbed together under a common umbrella named 'Boon Pong'. Even in China the word 'Boon Pong' is used and it refers to a Central organization.

In the historical accounts of Assam there is mention of the fact that the Singphos entered Assam during the time of the Ahom King Gaurinath Singha. However this fact is disputed as the Singphos claim that they inhabited either side of the Patkai Range in the eastern boundary of Assam from time immemorial. According to McKenzie in the year 1825 as mentioned in his notings he had encountered a group of Singphos in the western region of the Patkai range. In a journal published from Japan a person named 'Agukhen' had mentioned that the Singphos had migrated to Assam in the 12th century. In the 'Deodhai Asom buranji' edited by Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan it is mentioned that the names of a number of persons who had entered with the Ahom Chief Sukapha were similar to the names of some of the Singpho leaders.

Around 10th century AD due to exploitation carried out by some of the powerful Singpho Chiefs on the common people in north Kachin there was a revolt and a civil war was beginning to brew. Due to such reasons there could have been migration across the borders to Asom. When the Tai leader Sukapha entered Kamrupa, it is believed that along with him the Singpho leaders Mirip, Brang, Khakmong, Lisu Brang, La khep, Tangkhun la and Kanong were also proceeding towards Kamrupa. It is said that some Singpho people were in Kamrupa even before the advent of the Tai Ahom. The history of the Singphos is not available in the written form but through oral history which has been passed on from generation to generation many facts of the migration of Singpho to Asom is known.

During the time 1679-81 the absconding Ahom Prince Godapani was given shelter and treated with great respect by Bisa Roja of the Singpho dynasty. Later Bisa Roja was invited as a guest of honour during the coronation ceremony of Godapani. This throws some light on the Ahom-Singpho relations.

Many historical facts about the Singphos are known from the historical notings of the British colonial regime after their advent into Assam. At the time that the colonial rule began in Asom the Singpho community was spread over a large region in the eastern region of Assam. The four boundaries of the Singpho dynasty as mentioned in Arunodoi were, the Brahmaputra in the North, the Mishmi hills in the East, the Patkai ranges in the South and in the west it extended from the Nao-Dihing to the south banks of the Buri Dihing.

It is mentioned that every Singpho clan had a leader known as the 'Gaam'. Although they had so many leaders they followed the instructions of the more able leaders. Hence when many Singpho leaders signed the British-Singpho Treaty after the advent of the colonial regime in Asom the Singpho people nominated Bisa Gaam as their leader and followed his ideals and instructions.

In the Singpho dynasty there was no appointed leader as such. There were many leaders who ruled over their own regions. There were many powerful chiefs such as Bisa, Ningroo, Dupha, Lungtho who were distinguished leaders of the Singpho dynasty. With the advent of the British regime these leaders became very apprehensive as they were totally against losing their independence to the former. The British too were fearful of the brave and warlike Singpho people. After the fall of the Ahom Dynasty a Singpho force was formed comprising of 7500 recruits. During the Moamaria uprising the people of the Valley had pleaded with the Singpho leaders to bring peace in the region. It is stated that Gaam Gakhenthu was able to bring peace to the eastern region of the Mottock kingdom.

It took a while for the British to bring the Singpho leaders under their regime. Taking advantage of the fact that there was not much unity amongst the Singpho community living in different regions and under different chiefs the British were able to win over a sizeable number of the Singpho leaders and were successful in motivating them to sign the British-Singpho Treaty of 5th May 1826.

Defying the subjugation to the British regime Dupha Gaam left for Burma and returned in 1835 to revolt against the British killing ninety persons. Even persons who had entered into the British-Singpho Treaty pulled out of it and rebelled against the Colonial rulers. Such leaders were Ningroo Thumung in the year 1828 and later Baum Singpho.

Just as the colonial rulers wanted to bring the people of Assam under their rule so did they look at prospects of building their Royal exchequer. The State of Assam was rich with

nature's bounty especially in its eastern region, which was the centre for tea, oil and coal. It was in this region that the Singphos lived and it was here that the Singpho Chief Bisa Gaam introduced C.A Bruce to the tea bush in Assam. When it was established that the tea in Assam was of good quality the British took up the task of setting up tea plantations for which they started acquiring large tracks of land for the purpose. The people inhabiting the region expressed their unhappiness to see the colonial rulers taking up their land to set up the tea industry for their profit. The Singpho leaders communicated to the British rulers that the land from Namisang Mookh, Nao Dehing and Patkai were Singpho land however the British declared that wherever the tea grows that land is theirs. Bisa Gaam wrote a strong letter to the British Tea Company saying that tea was a part of their culture and it was necessary for all religious and traditional functions and the confiscation of their land will amount to a great sacrifice on the part of the Singpho people. Along the banks of the Buri Dehing the tea bushes grew wild and dense and the British were aware of the great prospects of growing tea in this region. Ningroo La was the Chief of the region around Ningroo and he was one of the few Singpho people who was associated with growing tea in a commercial manner. It was in Ningroo on the 20th January 1843 that the British forces had to face a fierce encounter from the Singphos.

The British had recruited a number of prominent Singpho persons into their administrative services. Gobardhan was the first Singpho person to be appointed to the position of the 'Zamadar'. His son 'Raghu' was allotted the position of the 'political Zamadar'. Soon after, this position went to the 'Wakhet' family of the Singphos. Initially it was 'Budhram' and later it was 'Sukoram' and 'Chandradhar' who were given the prestigious position. Prior to independence 'Bisa Ladoi' was appointed the Political zamadar.

The Singpho people were also associated with all the developmental schemes that were taken in the border areas. When coal and oil was struck in the eastern region of Assam and eventually coal, oil and tea industries came up in this region railway tracks were laid and the Singpho people participated in this task. The Singphos also took part in the World War II and extended their full support to the Allies. The Singpho people also donated large tracks of land to the British during the War to set up Military base at Lekhapani.

After Independence when a large area of the Eastern region inhabited by the Singphos went to Arunachal Pradesh, only a couple of villages namely, Ouguri and Digholi in Sibsagar and about twenty five villages remained with the Singpho community in and around Margherita

and between the Tirap river and the Buri Dehing remained with Assam. In Arunachal Pradesh the Singphos inhabit the Changlang and the Lohit districts. Although the Singpho community got divided by the setting up of the geographical boundaries of the two states a common cultural, social and religious thread runs through them. They jointly celebrate the Singpho national festival of Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi between the two states. Marriages take place amongst families of the two states who follow the religion of Buddhism.

Although the Singpho community in Arunachal Pradesh have made great strides in the political fields as also in the bureaucracy, in Assam the Singphos are yet to make a mark for themselves in any field

British – Singpho Relations

24th February 1826 is a date and year noted in the history of Assam as on that day the 'Treaty of Yandaboo' was signed between the British and the King of Ava of Burma and with the signing of this treaty the people of Assam lost their independence to the British colonial rulers of India. The people of Assam considered it to be safer to be under the British dispensation rather than suffer the wrath of the Burmese incursions. The influence of the British rule took time to reach the warrior and proud tribes of the hills and borders in the eastern parts of Assam, specially the Singpho and other tribes living in the eastern boundary of India. Unlike their fellow brothers and sisters in the Valley region, the Singphos a warrior tribe with great self esteem were determined to keep their freedom intact. This gave rise to the Singpho revolt against the British.

Unable to withstand the colonial troops a section of the Singpho leaders agreed to sign an Agreement with the British, namely the "British- Singpho Treaty". The day was Friday, the 5th of May 1826, the venue being Sadiya, the nerve centre of the British Empire. The signatories to the Treaty were Mr David Scott, agent to the British Governor General and a number of Singpho leaders, the latter agreeing to enter into a friendly relationship with the colonial rulers.

The clauses of the treaty which came into effect with the signing of the British- Singpho Treaty were:

1. The Singpho leaders have to comply with the British rulers.
2. They are not to enter any alliance with the kings of the Burmese or other neighbouring States to rebel against the British.

3. As and when necessary they are to assist the British troops.
4. They should release all their captives
5. The border disputes between the various Singpho leaders should be sorted out with the knowledge of the British.
6. Permission was granted to the Singpho leaders as well as to the Mottock and Khampti communities to settle civil and criminal complaints within their respective communities.
7. Bisa family leaders were declared leaders of their Singpho community

A large number of Singpho leaders however did not agree to comply with the British rulers and did not sign the British- Singpho Treaty of 1826. Often these leaders went against the British and attacked their forces through guerrilla tactics. It was also difficult for the British to handle the warring Singphos as they possessed the art of making guns and gun powder and ammunitions and were adept in guerrilla warfare. Therefore although a group of twenty Singpho leaders signed the Agreement with the British there was a huge number who were against them.

However with time the British won over most of the Chiefs, seventeen of them in 1836, and in 1840 a large number of Singpho leaders surrendered although many of them against their wishes. Yet there remained a section which always went against the British.

Although the Singphos are depicted as people living in remote areas of the eastern border of the State bordering Myanmar, yet the community was conscious and aware of the impending dangers of losing their independence to the colonial rulers. Many of the leaders did not sign the treaty by which they would be subservient to the British rulers but fought for their freedom. Many lost their lives, were banished or imprisoned for life. However when India gained Independence, their feats were recognised by the community although they remained unsung heroes in the eyes of the rest of the Nation.

The persons belonging to the Singpho community who deserve mention in this regard are, Baum Singpho, Ningroo Thummung, Ningroola of Ningroo village. After the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo the British annexed Assam and ruled Assam with an iron hand. The Singphos too along with the people of the Valley resisted to such subjugation and this led to numerous uprising and revolts. In the year 1828 there was an uprising in which thousands of rebels from the eastern border region revolted against the British. Ningroo Thummung, the Singpho leader declared war against the British and led the rebel force. On being apprised of

this situation in the region the British managed to take Ningroo Thummung into captivity and the latter was sent to Calcutta. Thummung however managed to escape and returned to lead the revolt with renewed vigour. Through British intelligence Ningroo was again captured, tried for treason and sent to the gallows. Although the name of Ningroo Thummung does not feature in the National history, Thummung is remembered amongst the Singpho community for his sacrifice and martyrdom.

Although some Singpho leaders came under the British with the signing of the British-Singpho Treaty, there were many who could not be brought to subservience. As the Singpho community had their relations in Burma and maintained communication with them, the British were apprehensive of possible alliance of the rebel Singpho leaders with the Burmese or other forces beyond the boundaries of the country. Hence the colonial rulers set up Sentry posts within the Singpho region namely, the Ningroo Post, the Kaujoodoo Post, the Bisa Post and the Ningrang Post.

After the Singpho uprising of January 1843 in Ningroo and other border Singpho regions, the British set up an Assam Light Infantry battalion to guard Ningroo region and the other sensitive border regions of Assam.

1st Assam Light Infantry Posts

- | | |
|---------------|--------|
| 1. Jaypur H.O | 4 Coys |
| 2. Saikhowa | 2 Coys |
| 3. Ningroo | 1 Coys |
| 4. Doom Dooma | 1 Coys |
| 5. Dibrugarh | 2 Coys |

The British suspected Ningroola, who was the pioneer amongst the Singpho community to take up Tea plantation and contribute to the tea Industry, of treason and inciting the 1843 uprising. He was removed from Dehing to Borowah Pather on the Nao Dihing. The Singpho people hold Ningroola in great esteem for he had not only brought the Singpho community to the map of the Tea Industry of Assam but also contributed to the political ideals of the Singpho community.

Under the British rule the people of the Assam had lost their political and economic freedom. Along with the rest of the country a wave of freedom movement had swept over the State of Assam to free themselves from colonial rule. In 1830 along with the Valley freedom fighter counterparts such as Piyoli Phukan, Jiuram Dulia Barua, Horonath Gohain, Deuram Dihingia Phuka, Baum Singpho too chalked out a path of revolt although he was one of the first to sign the British- Singpho Treaty of 1826 at Sadiya. Unfortunately the leaders of this rebellion were captured and tried at a British court lead by Lieutenant Neufville. According to the judgement passed on act of treason Piyoli Phukn and Dulia Barua were sent to the gallows while Baum Singpho and the other rebels were awarded life imprisonment and sent to Dhaka Jail.

India attained independence 1947 and even after more that sixty decades the sacrifice and the patriotism of Baum Singpho failed to get recognition in the national forum. It was only a few years aback that a bridge built over the River Tirap connecting Ledo and Bisa Gaon was named after Baum Singpho.

The Signatories to the BRITISH-SINGPHO TREATY and those who remained outside its ambit.

Table-I

Persons who signed the agreement in 1826					
Sl. No	Khel	Name of person who signed the agreement in 1826	Village	Name of successors since 9 th September 1840	Present Abode
1	Gukheng	Jaodoy	Koomlang		
2	Dubom	Toopum Khaw	Koomfye Pani	Dupong Nong	Koomfye Pani
3	Tongwa Nesoo Tengah Pani		Tongwoloh	Tengah Pani	Jaokheen
4	Moong Nong Khampti	Hokaph	Pokan Pani	Chown	Myheejan
5	Lattow	Jaajah	Tengah Pani		
6	Incha	Inchalah	Tengah Pani	Lataong	Tengah Pani
7	Moofoom	Moofoomlah	Ditto	Oophinong	Tengah Pani
8	Nering	Neringlah	Tougun Joopum	Chap Jao Lah	Marbah Pani
9	Gedang	Kettang Chap	Ditto		Jenthoo Pani
10	Tang Chang	Tang Chang Thag	Tengah Pani	Nongollah	Tengah Pani

11	Nethen	Jookhoom	Duffa Pani	Youngthong	Jenthoo Pani
12	Singreng	Laccham	Pokun Pani		
13	Moobun	Thyrungoo	Now Dihing		
14	Tonung	Sing Khrenglah	Jenthow Pani	Nungnoo	Tezee
15	Chop Khang	Joomoo	Tirrap	Jaomoo	Moodye Pani
16	Singmen	Koomjoy	Doom Pani	Nong	Ditto
17	Nikhoom Nisang	Monglongkooo	Hydun Young		
18	Noobrung	Cesabom	Kye Kahy Pani	Lattong and Bunka	Kherum Pani
19	Sookang	Koomjoy	Namsick Pani	Ooranung	Ditto
20	Owaket	Meejung	Pen Pani	Ooranung and Samrong	Now Dihing
21	Kotha	Chowkeng	Tirrap Pani	Kothadoo	Kherum Pani

Table - II

Persons who signed the Agreement in 1836

22	Sookhong	Chowbah	Tirrap Pani		
23	Lessoo	Jaodoo	Ditto	Jaodoo	Koomlang Pani
24	Nerem	Chao	Ditto	Jaodee	Moohung Pather
25	Meneme	Cham Nong	Ditto		
26	Koojoo	Ningun	Booriding Seemoang	Koojoodoo	Koomlang Pani
27	Kachan	Tangbung	Pen Pani		
28	Pissee	Peeseelah	Duffa Pani	Joungah	Noophrang Pani
29	Ditto	Choubun	Tongun Pani	Ditto	Ditto
30	Lett	Changtong	Ditto	Ditto	Ditto
31	Kamkoo	Chowbah	Jaorong	Jaorong	Ditto
32	Ningko	Chowta	Meeaokug		
33	Lessoo Lethoo	Chowkam	Tengah Pani	Koom Nong	Tengah Pani
34	Serrow	Lesseng	Doom Pani	Punglah	Perrani Pani
35	Moobun	Panjoo	Ditto		
36	Latto	Jaoboong	Ditto	Koomthoo	Boorowa Pather
37	Phooeyeng	Chengai Nong	Ditto	Nikrup Saree	Kherem Pani
38	Thoomshah	Oakreem	Bibroo Pani		

Table - III

Persons who did not sign the agreement			
Sl. No	Khel	Name	Present abode
1	Koojoo	Khoomjunlah	Dibro Pani and Dihing
2	Nengmye Chap	Tunngunlah	Mochung Pather
3	Ghinlong	Lajoo Chang Nong	Do
4	Ningroo	Lessing and his sons Chamun and Lah	Boorowa Pather
5	Needung	Koomjang Jao	Maun Mydaun
6	Moopoh	Do	Loarg Pather
7	Neenoo	Gam Khreng	Nangdoo Pather
8	Luggah	Gam	Do
9	Needen	Lakyelah	Jengthoo Pani
10	Phup	Loogoon	Tenga Pani
11	Needung	Neegah Nong	Do
12	Singmen	Gam	Do
13	Koomkee	Akowthom	Do
14	Incha Lesso	Do	Do
15	Singbam	Sam Nong	Do
16	Selleng Khet	Teng Kheng	Boorowa Pather
17	Ningram	Tang	Noondoo Pather
18	Lattoo	Jawrah	Nongkreng Pani
19	Neesoo	Maunjao	Puchullah
20	Engge Injah	Jaokhen	Tangah Pani
21	Sinleen	Lettoom	Merap Pani
22	Siyoung	Nungboo	Moodye Pani
23	Jaomah	Jaomah	Boorowa Pather Dhullee

Stilwell Road-A backdrop with special reference to the Singphos

The Stilwell Road, earlier known as the Ledo road, is indeed a monument to human ingenuity, extraordinary resilience and the unsurpassed courage and will of the many thousands of men and women who survived the horrendous odds to build this veritable lifeline from the upper reaches of Assam through the mountainous, rough terrain of the Patkai ranges to Kunming in the Yunnan Province of China. The Singpho community in Assam, Kachin and China were familiar with the thick forests regions of these rough mountainous tracks as they lived on either side of the Patkai ranges and travelled by foot through man-made tracks to keep connections between their kith and kin in all the three regions.

With the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbour and the subsequent Sino-Japanese War, the United States and China declared War against Japan. By February 1942, the Japanese Army had made considerable inroads into Burma necessitating the virtual evacuation of Rangoon its capital city. In the initial stages, the lakhs of Indian residents in particular who were feeling insecure both because of the enemy incursions as well as the hostility of the locals, attempted to flee by taking a sea route for Calcutta and Chittagong but as the situation worsened this became gradually impossible. Stranded and helpless many of them opted to make the perilous journey on foot through largely uncharted terrain. Early in 1942 when the Burma Road to Kunming in China was to all intents and purposes closed, it became strategically imperative for the British forces to hold the Assam Burma Hills. Strategically therefore it became important to maintain a supply route from Assam Province to China via Burma so as to facilitate the advances of the Allied forces into Burma, to provide the much needed supplies to a struggling Chinese army and also to continue necessary re-inforcements to the Koumintang to enable them to take the resistance and fight the Japanese forces who had occupied Burma.

General Joseph W. Stilwell was entrusted in 1942 with the task of building a road from Ledo through Kachin in Burma to Kunming in the Yunan Province of China. This herculean job would not have been possible without the guidance and the knowledge that the Singpho and other tribes such as Lisus of Tai Ahom origin, the Khamtis and Mishmais, inhabiting either side of the Patkai ranges. It is a well known fact that the Singpho people living on either side of the Patkai Ranges were spread over north Myanmar to the Yunan Province of China, they being known as Singphos in Assam, Kachins in Myanmar and Jingphaw in China. The Singpho community people maintained social relationships, trade and regular communication amongst themselves in the three regions, the route being through the steep, dense and rough terrain of the Patkai ranges.

To embark on the construction project a brave Singpho person named Muru Gaam was given the responsibility to draw up a survey report of the proposed road. Within a very short period of time Muru Gaam completed the survey and chalked out the shortest route from the eastern border area of the Assam Province to Burma. As a reward for his job done Muru Gaam was presented with a rifle by the British authorities.

The work on this road began in 1942 and was completed in late 1944, and this Road connected Ledo in Assam to Kunming in Yunnan, China, was built through "the edges of

mountainous defiles, through deep gorges, raging rapids, and some of the world's most impenetrable jungles". The Ledo Road was christened Stilwell road in honour of General J.W Stilwell on 28th January 1945.

Bisa Ladoi, a decendent of the famous Bisa Gaam, who had introduced the British to the Tea shrub, was a powerful Chief of the Singphos. He was considered the Sentinel of the extreme eastern border of the Assam Province and his durbar sanctioned the permission letter for the community members to embark on a journey to Burma through the Patkai Range. Besides extending help in the construction of the Stilwell road Bisa Ladoi also provided help in a number of ways to the Allied forces during World War II.

In 1945 when the World War II came to an end, there was a lull in the transport and communication activities over the Stilwell road. Bisa Ladoi, a man of great foresight offered his services to the British to take up the responsibility of maintenance of the Stilwell road. He expressed his desire through a letter that he wrote to the Political Officer, Tirap Frontier Tract, Margherita. The letter follows:

To
The Political Officer,

Tirap Frontier Tract, Margherita

Dated Margherita the 25 June 1948

Sub: Maintenance of Stilwell Road upto 27 miles

Sir,

I have come to know from your office that you are going to give the above contract to one tribal people. In this connection I am to inform you that there are no such capable men (tribal) in our side to undertake above contract.

So, I would like to request you to kindly grant me the above contract in my name and I am ready to start the work as soon as the contract is allocated to me.

Yours faithfully

Sd/ Bisa Ladoi

The construction of the 'Ledo Road' later known as the 'Stilwell Road', stretching from the small town of Ledo in Assam province to Kunming the provincial capital of Yunnan and also the re-conquering of north Burma would not have been possible without the co-operation and support of the local hill tribes specially the Kachins. NawSeng, a young Kachin Subedar, the most outstanding of the Northern Kachin Levies, was awarded the Burma Gallantry Medal for his role in the War.

Towards this noble endeavour of the construction of the Stilwell Road, the contribution of the thousands of unnamed volunteers who overcame monumental logistical and other obstacles to complete the road in a remarkable short period of time under the able and dynamic General Joseph W Stilwell, will be written in letters of gold and is a testament of human heroism, sacrifice and patriotism. Tens and thousands of Chinese, Kachin, Singphos and other tribal people inhabiting both sides of the Patkai Range had a great role to play along with the people of the Tea plantations of Assam and the American pilots, in contributing their might to the building of this great road. Their sacrifice, heroism and patriotic fervour are talked of even today in glowing terms.

Some Historical Figures:



Bisa Jawkhong



Bisa Iadoi



Ningroola



Chapter –II

Society and Social Institutions

The Singphos belong to a democratic society where both men and women have equal status. Although the Singphos are a patriarchal society it ascribes to the womenfolk an exalted status as is evident from their traditions and customs. In asking for the hand of a bride the bridegroom has to pay a 'bride price' which in olden times consisted of a gun, a 'mithun', a traditional gong and other items. Honour and respect is shown to the bride's family and when important decisions and rituals are to be carried out in a girl's inlaw's place it is the maternal uncle who is taken into confidence and his advice sought in performing the important rituals.

The Singpho society has no caste system but they belong to different clans each under a 'Dua' or chief known as the 'Gaam'. There were many powerful chiefs such as Bisa, Ningroo, Dupha, Lungtho, Ripho, Ningrang who were distinguished leaders of the Singpho. The Singpho society being a warrior tribe maintained their innate cohesion through their society leadership, traditions and customs, and followed their societal rituals with few or no inter tribe marriages. However, with the advent of time, though some assimilation has taken place in the form of inter community marriages this is more the exception than the rule.

The Singpho society abide by their own customary laws and it is rare indeed that the community members ever take the help of the State judiciary system. Even to this day customary law is taken recourse to sort out problems related to marriage, theft or any other social and legal matters within the Singpho society.

The Singphos strictly adhere to their community traditions and culture and consequently, the customs and rituals related to marriage, birth and death, their folk dances, songs and festivals, their traditional forms of livelihood, cuisine and costumes are intact and so is their traditional identity.

Demographic characteristics

The greatest apprehension of the Singpho community in recent time is the decrease in their population numbers. A community that was spread over a large area in the eastern region of Assam had had an appreciable population in the past. However at recent times when there is a surge in population numbers all over the world the dwindling population numbers of some of

the ethnic communities of Assam is a matter of great concern specially to the communities themselves.

The Singphos do not have written documents on their history of their past. It is only through oral folklore, oral renditions, and inter-generational communication that history has been noted. However after the advent of the British their file notings mention facts related to the Singpho community. It has been mentioned in a report of the all India census in 1931 that the Singpho population was three thousand. In the year 1953 the New York Times carried a news report that estimated the Singpho population had grown to seventy thousand. Sixty years later the Singpho community claims that the population instead of soaring to a high number has gone down to just about 3000 in Assam. With the dwindling numbers there is the great threat of losing their culture, their social traditions, knowledge and on the whole their identity.

The Singpho community in ancient times dominated a considerable region of the eastern part of the Assam province. They were spread out over the areas within and around Margherita, Ledo, Sadiya, and Namrup. During the colonial regime there were a number of Singpho villages in Sadiya and in Doomdooma. As the population number was considerable the British also took the step of setting up of a school at Saikhowaghat. There was a large population of Singpho community inhabiting the region of Margherita and Ledo. The Singphos claim that the name Ledo was originally a Singpho word 'Li – Dong'. The names of some of the Singpho villages during that era are given below:

1. Lephang; Hadsa; Kadsa; Laa : villages close to Saikhowa
2. Jagun : Close to Nahorkotia
3. Mulan : Close to Doomdooma
4. Maithong; Lajum : Close to Kakopothar
5. Jagun : in the banks of the Nao-Dihing
6. Ningroo : In the foothills of the Patkai Range
7. Lajum ; Maseh ; Siru; Phaltu : in Margherita area

Approximately from 1810 to 1837 Sadiya was inhabited by only Singpho and Khamti communities. With demographic changes taking place in this region the Singpho population has gone down. Such decrease in population could be attributed to assimilation of the Singpho people with other communities or due to their moving away from the region due to demographic changes. Such an instance of assimilation as pointed out by certain community members is that of the 'Kumral' clan of the Sonowal Kacharis and some Singpho people.

In the region of Margherita and Ledo which were the stronghold of the Singpho people the numbers have dwindled. With the discovery of coal and oil and with the advent of indentured labours and the ensuing demographic changes the many Singpho people were dislodged from their original habitat. The setting up of the tea plantations, the oil, coal and tea and other industries that came up at the Singpho inhabited regions lead to great demographic changes and changes in the environment leading to the population decline in the Singpho regions. The Tea bush was introduced by the Bisa Gaam, the Singpho Chief, to Robert Bruce which was the beginning of the tea industry in Assam Province during the British regime. However when the tea plantations came up with a flourishing industry the colonial rulers claimed the land of the Singphos themselves where the tea bushes grew wild and healthy. This led to loss of Singpho land and could be the beginning of displacement and population decline.

All these reasons and many be more could be the reasons for the dwindling numbers of the Singpho community which has its own repercussions in loss of culture, social mores and ethnic identity.

The table below gives the names of the present Singpho villages in the different districts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh with their approximate number of households and population.

State	District	Circle	Village Name	No. of Households	Total Population
Assam	Sivasagar	Sonari	Ouguri	31	155
Assam	Sivasagar	Sonari	DighaliGaon	23	92
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Dibong	37	150
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Enthong	7	35
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	HkalenGa (Rajnagar)	6	36
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Ketetong	68	374
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Nakong Na	5	25
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Kuwato - Ga (Bahbari)	15	47
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Ulup-Ga	16	65
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Pang Na	13	42
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Inthem	90	567

Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Mung-Gong Na	20	162
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Mung-Gong Ritu Na	8	33
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Duwar Mara	51	205
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Pang Sun	25	102
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Kum Chai Kong	39	157
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	NamawGa	17	68
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Hasak	14	58
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Kotha-Ga	7	26
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Bisa-Ga (Ledo)	4	22
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	Panbari (KhajanGa)	8	33
Assam	Tinsukia	Margherita	BitorPawoi	16	67
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Bordumsa	46	187
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Goju	38	155
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Wakhet Na	37	158
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Gidding Na	18	77
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Dirak Na	9	38
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Dapkhu	7	32
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Saimo	8	35
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	KheremKha	5	27
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Gelenja	7	31
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	KheremBisa	32	132
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Wagun - 1	12	52

Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Wagun - 2	9	41
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Wagun - 3	6	33
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	BarikGa	5	27
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Bordumsa	Balijan	11	52
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao &Diyun	Miao Singpho	15	68
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao &Diyun	NamphaiSingpho	16	64
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao &Diyun	SikauGa	8	35
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao &Diyun	Ning Rang Ga	6	25
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao &Diyun	PisiGa	16	67
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao &Diyun	PhupGa	3	15
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao &Diyun	KhagamGa	7	32
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao &Diyun	LewangGa	12	52
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao &Diyun	DumbaSingpho	18	75
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao &Diyun	MudoiGa	22	92
Arunachal Pradesh	Changlang	Miao &Diyun	InnaoGa	27	112
Arunachal Pradesh	Namsai	Namsai	Inden (N'den)	7	34
Arunachal Pradesh	Namsai	Namsai	Lathao	5	24

Arunachal Pradesh	Namsai	Namsai	Wagun	13	52
Arunachal Pradesh	Namsai	Namsai	DeobilSingpho	16	66
Arunachal Pradesh	Namsai	Namsai	Nong Kham	8	35
Arunachal Pradesh	Namsai	Namsai	JunaPather	11	44
Arunachal Pradesh	Namsai	Namsai	Piyong (Singpho)	19	76
Arunachal Pradesh	Namsai	Namsai	Ningru	3	15
Arunachal Pradesh	Namsai	Namsai	NamsaiSingpho	14	57
Arunachal Pradesh	Lohit	Chaw Kham	Emphum (N'hpum)	18	76
Arunachal Pradesh	Lohit	Chaw Kham	Ingsa (N'saGa)	7	32
Arunachal Pradesh	Lohit	Chaw Kham	Project Ga	8	37
Arunachal Pradesh	Lohit	Chaw Kham	DingwaGa	4	17
Arunachal Pradesh	Lohit	Chaw Kham	Nam Go Ga	12	52
Arunachal Pradesh	Lohit	Chaw Kham	InchoGa (N'Chow)	15	67
Arunachal Pradesh	Lohit	Chaw Kham	ImbongGa (N'Bong)	3	17
Arunachal Pradesh	Lohit	Chaw Kham	Mung Lang	7	28
Arunachal Pradesh	Lohit	Chaw Kham	DulengGa	3	15
Arunachal Pradesh	Lohit	Chaw Kham	LathawGa	3	12

Singpho Marriage, Birth and Death Rituals

Marriage Rituals

The Singpho marriage system follows some strict customary rules. In the Singpho dialect the bridegroom's party is called *Sawi or Dama* and the bride's party is called *Mayu*. Any boy belonging to a *Sawi* family can marry a girl of a *Mayu* family but no boy of a *Mayu* family can marry a girl belonging to a *Sawi* family. So, in the Singpho marriage system a boy related to a *Sawi* or *Dama* can only marry a girl related to a *Mayu*. In spite of that, *khra wang lam* or triangular marriage system is prevalent in the Singpho society.

Khra Wanglam: *Khra Wang Lam* is a triangular shaped system of marriage e.g. If a boy belonging to family 'A' marries a girl from family B, if a boy from family B marries a girl from family C and if a boy from family C marries a girl from family A, then the system is called *Khra Wang Lam*. In the Singpho dialect *khra* means triangle, *wang* means 'circle' and *lam* means 'way'. But the rule cannot be repeated. i. e. customarily a boy from the family C cannot marry a girl from the family B and a boy from family B can not marry a girl from the family A. In any case if anyone violates this rule both the families have to face tough punishment such as, fine in the form of cash may be imposed upon them or they may be excommunicated.

There are three kinds of marriage system prevalent in the Singpho society, namely:

1. *Shakawng Aw*
2. *Miyun Lam* and
3. *Phron Lam*

1. **Shakawng Aw:** *Shakawng Aw* is considered to be the most traditional form of marriage system followed in the Singpho society. In this system, guardians from *Sawi* i. e. the bridegroom's party sends a delegate to the *Mayu* family with a proposal for their girl. As soon as the bride's family agrees with the proposal the first stage of marriage begins. The *Shakawng Aw* marriage system is divided into three stages. The first stage is called 'Kumbang Jun', the second stage is called 'Tsi lap la' and the third stage is called 'khrungram pai'.

The first stage-Kumbang Jun: For the *Kumbang Jun* ceremony, the *Bungulot* or the village priest helps in finalizing a suitable date for the ceremony. As suggested by the *Bungulot* an appropriate date is fixed for *Kumbang Jun* at *Mayu's* house and the guardians of the bridegroom family invites all the relatives or family members to attend the *Kumbang Jun* ceremony. On the specified day the *Sawi* or *Dama* family with all their members go to the *Mayu* family bringing with them a couple of *Mugun Singnoi*. *Mugun Singnoi* is a special kind of conical basket used by the Singphos for carrying on the back. A *Mugun Singnoi* must contain the following:

1. Two numbers of *Udi Nclum* i. e. two bamboo tubes containing a) boiled eggs 8 nos. b) dry fish, c) *kaldil* (banana flower) or boiled heart of a plantain tree, d) ginger etc.
2. Eight numbers of *Tsa Tingkhang* i. e. eight bamboo tubes containing fish and liquor.
3. One *Nthu*. i. e. a large knife.
4. One meter *Nba Sumpan*. i. e. white markin cloth.
5. *Laokhu*. i. e. a bottle of liquor.
6. One number of *Gungphrong Joi*. i. e. Rs. 140 packaged in a *kaupaat*, a leaf of wild plant.

After reaching the house of the *Mayu*, both the *Singnoi* or conical baskets are offered to the senior people of the girl's family and their relatives present there. The *Mayus* serve a meal to the *Sawi*. After the meal the *Sawis* are brought to a nearby house from where the *Sawi* sends a *khring mang* or delegate to the house of *Mayu* to seek permission to discuss the issue. The 'khring mang' brings with him three bundles of money packaged in separate *kaupaat*, a kind of wild leaf similar to ginger or turmeric. Each bundle of money has a separate name and significance.

1. *Boimung Guwen*
2. *Khau Phuga*: (*Khau Phuga* is not required if the family has earlier marital relations with the *Mayu* family.)
3. *Gabau Phuga* is meant for seeking permission for discussions.

After accepting all the three bundles the Mayus send another Khungmang to discuss the issue. Both the khunmangs then present before each other the views and demands of the Dama and the Mayu families. If the discussions are successful, the Mayu family invites the relatives of the Sawi family and vice versa. 'Malikhang Phawa' (i.e. the money paid to the guardians for a girl sought in marriage.) is a widely prevalent practice amongst the members of the Singpho society.

Malikhang Phawa contains the following or the equivalent in cash :

1. Nga Ganu and Nga Guula (i.e. 1 female buffalo and 1 male buffalo)
2. Sing Mang Malai Nga (one female buffalo).
3. Ngat Nga (one buffalo for sacrifice on the day of marriage. However, this practice has been dispensed with after they embraced Buddhism).
4. Bau (two numbers of Gongs about 8 feet in diameter.
5. Sanat (two numbers of guns.).
6. Sawa Nang Khaichi (a National garland), two numbers.
7. Yangphao Palong Phochyong Lahu (a Royal dress or a dress from the Yunan Province of China.).
8. Gumphrawng Joi Si (rupees one thousand four hundred).

The Mayu family after accepting the Malikhang Phawa invites the Sawi family the next morning for a feast. This is called 'Sawi Thenglaun'. To attend the feast, the Sawi selects their leader whom they call Sawi Ningbawng. They also select Kambang Pheer Uda i.e. the persons who would stay overnight at Mayu's house for the night and the group of people should be an even number viz. 18, 20, 22, 24, etc. To attend the feast the Sawi Ningbawng leads the team and enters first. Everybody present in the feast is offered cock head and Haans (a traditional rice beer.) with rice. After the meal, the Sawi Ningbawng offers 'Sawi Lakhan' to a senior person of Mayu. Sawi Lakhan means the ornaments and clothing sent from the bridegroom's house to the bride at the commencement of the marriage ceremonies. A Sawi Lakhan consist of :

1. Bokang (i.e. a kind of lower garment worn by the Singpho women)
2. Nongwat (i. e. a kind of scarf worn by the Singpho women)
3. Plong (i. e. a jacket or tunic worn by the Singpho women)
4. Kapai (I .e. a kind of wrapper worn by the Singpho women)
5. Chinket (I .e. a kind of waist band worn by the Singpho women)
6. Lukhan (I .e. a kind of bracelet worn by the Singpho women)
7. Lokan (I .e. a kind of ear ring worn by the Singpho women)
8. Lakshop (I .e. a kind of ring)
9. Kitchi or necklace etc.

All the aforesaid things are arranged beautifully on a bamboo tray known as khawng and tied with threads. Then the Sawi Lakhan offers blessings. According to the customary law the Gumbang Phun Wa spends the night at Mayu's house and the rest of the team members return home.

Second stage - Tsi lap la ceremony: This is an essential part of the Singpho marriage system. After six to eight months of the kumbang Jun ceremony the Tsi lap la ceremony is organized. The Khring Mang or the messenger accompanied by a few senior members of the Sawi family visit the Mayu family in search of Tsi lap a kind of herb to prepare rice beer which is to be served to the marriage guests. The Mayu after providing Tsi lap presents a list of the relatives to the Sawi for Mugun Signoi. After being offered the Mugun Signoi by the Sawi another stage begins.

Third Stage - Khangran Poi – After the completion of Kumbang Jun and Tsi Lap La Ceremony the Khangran Poi ceremony starts. In a given/stipulated date the members of the Sawi family proceed to the Mayus house with two numbers of Mugun Singnoi and two Khungmong. They then offer the Mugun Singnoi to the Mayus. On that particular day the Mayus invite their relatives and all the village people to the Khangran Poi ceremony and arrange the feast. Once the feast is over the marriage of the bride of the Mayu house also ends. The Mayu family then requests a few selected persons to represent the team for going to the Sawi house. The team includes.

1. Kumbang wen Jan
2. Was Thau wa, ie, a person who is responsible for the pig sacrifice
3. And Mayn powt wa ie, the people from the maternal uncle's house of the bride.

The parents of the bride do not accompany the team, although elder brothers, elder sisters, paternal uncles or aunts and all other relatives can go with the team. There is a customary rule that the sawi should offer a token amount in cash to the female head of the team before staying at the Mayn houses. This is called Kha Makhai

Secondly, the Sawi should offer a token amount in cash to the relatives or friends of the bride. This is called Lakhap si.

The Mayu then arranges two Sakawng Singnoi or conical bucket made of bamboo to be filled up with the following articles:

1. Head of the Great Indian Hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*)
2. Bamboo tube containing Saans or local rice beer.
3. Ornaments of Gold and silver
4. National Dress
5. Singpho Knife
6. A pair of gongs and
7. Two numbers of Ningri or spears

Both the Ninri or spears are beautifully decorated and carried out by the two female guides of the bride.

The time is set much ahead of when the Mayu would stay at the house and when to enter the bride groom's house. Every minute is precious on the day of marriage. The Mayu team before entering the Sawi village stops because of the "Namsung". Namsung is a custom of welcoming the Mayn or bride's party in the Sawi village.

In a Numsong Ja, the Sawi demands

- (i) A Buffalo
- (ii) A pair of gongs
- (iii) A gun

However, the value of these things in the form of money is also acceptable. After receiving the Numsong Ja, the Mayu of the bride's party goes to a camp arranged by the Sawi for taking rest.

When the stipulated time for marriage approaches, the Sawi sends a Khringmang to the Mayu camp. He then informs the Nat Ming (Secret name) of the bride-groom's party and seeks permission to prepare the bride with traditional costumes/dress. As soon as permission is granted, a few senior female members of the Sawi dress up and decorates the bride with their national dress/costumes and ornaments.

After the completion of all these formalities the Nam Manam or bride's party starts the journey towards the La Manam or bride groom's house. Interestingly, the general mood is sportive as well as playful. They pretend to be very tired and full of pain in the feet and therefore are not able to move. They will move only after receiving money. Thus the boys and girls of both the Sawi and Mayu team enjoy the journey. The Mayu, after reaching the campus gate of the Sawi house are welcomed and asked to be seated in the main pandal arranged for the wedding ceremony. The bride and the Kumbang Wen Jan are requested to be seated in two special wooden chairs arranged for them.

After the feast the boys and girls of both parties indulge in some fun and gaiety and generally enjoy themselves. The community priest then places a rooster over the head of the bride and offers puja to the family God. This priest is called Uphun U Dumsa. After this, the Wa Thaw Wa is called upon for the rituals of sacrificing a pig. However, this ritual has died out after they adopted Buddhism. Now the Kumbang we Jan/Jon and Num manam Jon crosses over the holy grass of Kumbang. After crossing over the Kumbang grass, the Kumbang wen Jan has to sacrifice a rooster. (This practice too has died out). After the completion of all these rituals the bride and Kumbang wen Jan cross over the Kumbang grass. But the rest of the team members accompanying the Myan family need not follow this practice.

After the customs of crossing over kumbang grass, the mother of the groom welcomes the bride and brings her into a separate room. All the articles carried from the Mayn house are now handled over to the sawi family. The Kumbang wen Jan or the friend of the groom together with a few girls stay the night there and the rest of the Mayu's party returns to the camp. The Sakawng Don Ceremony is held that night. The bride herself cooks Sakawng Pha in the night and distributes it amongst the Sawi family. One of the senior of the ladies present then introduces each and every body present there to the bride when distributing Sakawng phP and creates new relationships. At this time both the Khoing Mangs offers a bundle of money to the Mayu. This is called Khauya Bnga. The amount of Khauya Bnga may vary from Rupees 30 to Rupees 140.

The Sawi invites the Mayu, present in camp for Nelw Bey and Mayu Thinlun. The Mayn then goes to the Sawi house to attend the Mayn Thinlun programme with a few selected members like – Mayn Pawt Wa, Wa Thau Wa, Kumbang Wen Jan etc.

The Mayn Pawt Wa guide the team and enters the Sawi house. After sitting there for merely 5 to 10 minutes, they return to the camp carrying with them the Shongking K a, a conical basket full of pork and traditional smoking pipe. The Mayus again return to the feast called Mayu Thinglun. The Mayn Pawt Wa, the guide of the team is given an offering of pig head, intestine, heart etc. and the others are offered a rooster's head. After the feast both the bride and the groom are invited to take the blessings and advice of the elders. The Mayu then gets ready to return. Then a few boys and girls from the Sawi stop their progress in a spirit of fun by closing the door and ask for money, they allow the Mayu to go only after receiving money. They also put up human barriers in the shape of a Jakhala or traditional stair case and a Nangala, the traditional main gate of the Sawi. The Mayu has to cross these barriers only by making an offering of money.

After this the Mayu prepares to stay at the camp and invites the owner of the camp to offer Kumpha or some amount of money for staying in the camp. This is called Phochong Som.

After a few days the parents of the bride together with a few others present themselves at the Sawi house. This is called 'laphan Thong' ceremony. Nearly two months after the marriage the bride and groom visits the Mayu house. They bring with them Mugan Signoi.

2. **Mayun Lum:** Informal and very short system of Marriage. In this system there is no need of Sakawng Singnoi and Tsi Lap La ceremonies. Only a few relatives of the Mayu house go

to the Sawi house and then invite the relatives of Mayu to the Mayu Thing Lun ceremony. The Sawi at that time has to pay Gyadhan, that is, an amount of money paid to the guardian for a girl sought in marriage. This system of marriage is or can be arranged if both the Mayu and Sawi families are economically backward/ financially weak and are unable to follow the Sakawng system of marriage.

3. **Phrongla Lam:** The third system is called Phrongla lam. In this system the boy elopes with the girl and marries her when they both love each other but face parental objection to their union. Then they opt for this system. To make this marriage legally acceptable a few steps are taken. The father of the boy sends an elderly person to the house of the girl's guardian to inform him about the happenings and to offer a bundle of money packed in Koupaat (leaves of a beal herb). This is called Khan Galam Su. They also offer another bundle which is called Ntai Jing Kha La. After that the elders meet the village head and offers Namsang Jingkhala. In this way the Phrong La Lam marriage is held.

The Sawi after consultation with the priest fixes a suitable day and visits the Mayn house. They stay the night at Mayu's house and decide about the amount of money to be offered as Gaa Dhan to the bride's father/parents. This is very similar to Malikhang Phowa. But there is another practice attached to this ceremony and it is the penalty imposed upon the boy's family in the form of money for eloping with the girl. After dinner, the Sawi team is brought to a nearby house arranged for their stay by the Mayu. From there, they send two Khangmong to resolve the situation in a spirit of mutual understanding. Next morning they attend the feast. This is called Sawi Thoughtlun. Incidentally there is a tradition in the Singpho society which permits a boy to marry his maternal cousin (ie, the daughter of his maternal uncle)

However, if the maternal uncle does not have any daughter it becomes his duty to find a suitable girl for his nephew and without his permission the boy cannot ask for a girl's hand from any other family. If this is not followed a penalty is imposed upon the Sawi family.

The Khring mango or the delegate has an important role in the Singpho marriage system. Sometimes a marriage can even be annulled due to an inefficient Khringmong if he does not have a proper knowledge of the customary marriage customs and is not able to respond properly to the demands of his counter part. Because only an efficient Khringman can handle the situation with proper control.

Each and every elder of the Singpho community is familiar with the wedding rules and customs and they pass on this knowledge to the younger generation so that they can carry on the tradition. Some of these customs are however fast disappearing with the passage of time.

Birth Rituals

The birth of a baby in a Singpho village is traditionally announced with the sound of gun fire. There are some rituals associated with child birth. A senior well-to-do lady is chosen to assist the child birth by severing the umbilical chord which she does with the help of a dry sharp bamboo file. If it is a girl child, the umbilical chord is placed under the soil near the west pole of the 'Chang-ghar' called the 'Pani Khuta'. On the other hand if it is a boy child the chord is placed under the soil near the main pole of the house called the 'Mudos Khuta'.

On the seventh day of the birth the child is given a bath and the child's grandfather or any elderly person of the family takes the child for the first time out of the house and takes him/her to the east side of the house for the child to be blessed by the Sun God. If it is girl child the baby is shown a mirror or other material used by a girl while if it is a boy child he is shown a sword and a metallic knife. The person carrying the child carries a 'Ningri Singdoi' and a 'Nthu' (sharp metallic knife) with him. A few senior members of the village are invited for a meal on that day. They tie thread around the wrist of the child and bless him/her for a bright future. Also the lady who helped at the time of child birth is shown great respect on this occasion.

The village 'Dumra' is invited for an astrological calculation and suggest a name according to it. This is done by taking into account the time, date and day of the birth of the child.

The village society also welcomes the new born to their community by visiting the new born's place and showering blessings on and offering gifts to him/her.

Death Rituals

The Singpho community were animists in ancient times but over the years they have accepted Buddhism. Today they follow Buddhism and thus many of the rituals that they followed earlier have undergone changes.

Before they converted to Buddhism the rituals associated with the death of a person entailed a long process. The dead body was either consigned to the flames or buried. Both these rituals were accepted by the society. In the event of a death the people of the village are informed by

the firing of the gun and also by sounding of the 'Borkanh'. If the person who expired was aged, or a prominent personality or an affluent person his/her body was put in a coffin, treated with lime and rice and laid to rest there for three to four days so that the relatives, friends and the well wishers living in distant places could travel and reach the house of the dead to pay their last respects. During the days that the dead is kept in the house food and other offerings are made to the dead because the Singpho people believe that the soul of the dead revolves around the household for six days after the death.

There are some rituals which are followed while preparing the coffin or 'Du-U'. The coffin is made out of a tree of soft timber such as that of the 'Modar Gos'. Before felling of the tree for the purpose a few rituals are observed. A sacrifice of chicken and other animals is made. The tree is felled and the coffin made out of it. The body is placed in the coffin by the son-in-law or anyone from his family. A priest is consulted to assign a date for the last rites which is done through calculations based on the time, date and day of expiry. The last rites are carried out on the west side of the household. The Singpho people believe that on death one should be given a farewell with joy and happiness and therefore on such an occasion everyone conveys there respect to the deceased through the Si Manau and prays for the eternal peace of the soul. : On the occasion of the death of a person before the last rites are carried out, the Si Manau dance is performed. This dance - song performance bids a joyous farewell to the deceased.

On the seventh day prayers are offered to the Spirits or the 'Nats' and a feast 'Phanglup Poi' is hosted in which they serve pork, chicken and buffalo meat for the eternal peace of the departed soul.

Close to 1882 the Singpho community accepted Buddhism and since then there have been many changes in the religious traditions of the Singphos. The death rituals have also undergone changes. According to the Buddhism rituals the dead are buried and this is known as 'maidam diya' although some people still follow the tradition of consigning the dead to the flames. According to Buddhist traditions no sacrifice of animals is made. From the day of the passing away of the person till the sixth day depending on the financial position of the family the worldly possessions of a person are given away 'Daan-Dokinya' as gifts. On the seventh day the Buddhist priest performs the traditional rituals for the eternal peace of the soul of the dead.

Wedding Rituals



Chapter- III

Religion & Rituals

Singpho society and Buddhism

In ancient times the Singphos were the worshippers of Nature. They had believed in different kinds of 'Naat' or deities at different times. They believed in animal sacrifice and the offering of liquor etc to propitiate their deities or the Naat. Such traditions were performed by a priest called 'Dumsawa'. For the well-being of the community, the 'Dumsawa' would sing hymns and worship their deities. Amidst such naturalistic beliefs the Singpho community was attracted towards Buddhism and took it up as their religion about a hundred and forty years ago leaving behind their old traditions and religious practices. It was the influence of a Buddhist devotee named Pien Duen Sirad of Burma who had come to Assam from across the Patkai Hills and spread Buddhism amongst the Singphos inhabiting the eastern border areas of Assam. They embraced Buddhism in 1882. Besides the Singphos several other ethnic groups also took up Buddhism as their religion. There have been remarkable changes in the Singpho Society after this acceptance of Buddhism.

They had abandoned the earlier religious practices of performing Naat puja by offering animal sacrifice and liquor. Gradually they also left the habits of drinking rice beer or liquor. After achieving 'Panchasheel', 'Asta Sheel' or 'Muktimarg' the Singphos, once a warrior community, became calm and peace loving. They took upon themselves the work of constructing Buddh Viharas in their villages. The Buddh Viharas, besides being religious centres are also centres of their socio-cultural lives. After the grand mentor (Mahaguru) Pien Duen Sirad from Burma, another grand mentor (Mahaguru), Oo.Biria Mahasthabir had been the flagbearer in spreading Buddhism amongst the Singphos. Oo.Biria Mahasthabir (1860-1936) was a son of the "Dibong" family which founded the present Dibong village of Margherita. The Dibong Gaam after accepting Bhikshutwa was known by the name of U.Biria Bhikshu. He was a very talented scholar of Buddhism and possessed a sound knowledge of the holy Book 'Tripitak'. He had been in continuous touch with the Buddhists societies of Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka. In the year 1936 this grand mentor had attained Nirvana at Tumu in Burma.

A few disciples of Oo. Biria Mahasthabir were Gunabanta, Mahind, Jin and Bimal. Amongst them Oo Mahind Mahastavir (1894-1920) belonged to the Masse race of the

Singphos community. At a very tender age he had become a pupil of U. Biria Mahasthavir and went to Burma for higher studies. There he accepted Bhikshutwa. Besides being acquainted with the scriptures of the Tripitak he also studied Astrology, Logic, Scriptures etc. After returning home in the year 1932, he settled in the Ketetong Buddh Vihar to practice Buddhism. His main disciples were Pnditcha Bhikkhu, Gnyanuar and Narind Bhikkhu Zamadar Chandradhar Gogoi (Wakhet) a political Zamadar during the British period and one of the main persons associated with the construction of the Stillwell road left all the materialistic and worldly connections of life and attained Bhikshutwa. Later he had become known as Oo Bisuddhachar Mahasthabir (1887-1967). He devoted his life to the spread of Buddhism and at last attained Nirvana in the Ketetong Buddh Vihar. Oo Sirinda Mahasthavir (1912-1955) who was popularly known as 'Gitikabi' translated the Buddhist chantings into the Singpho dialect. His invocations are chanted in the Buddh Viharas.

A famous religious mentor of Buddhism of the present time is Srimat Warnasar Mahather, the chairperson of the Dibong Buddh Bihara. In the year 1969, Srimat Mahather received a diploma in Buddhist studies from Srilanka University in Colombo after which he returned to Dibong village for a year. In the year 1970, he again moved to Nalanda Vihar, the educational nerve-centre of the ancient Buddha. In 1972 he attained the degree of Acharya from the "Darbhanga Sanskrit Biswabidyalaya". Just after two years he also completed his post-graduation from the "Magadha Biswabidyalaya". In 1975 he accepted the position of chairperson of Dibong Buddha Vihar only because of his love and affection for his native place. The establishment of Dibong Pali Bidyalaya in 1977, B.R. Ambedkar Boy's Hostel in 1996 and Dibong Buddha Vihar in 2003 were the result of the hard work and sacrifice of this spiritual guru. He has been a key factor in encouraging and providing the opportunity to the dedicated students of Buddha Scriptures to study abroad for the enrichment of Buddhism. Besides being popular and famous as a spiritual guide he has made substantial contributions to the field of literature. The life of Pien Duan, Buddha Charya Bidhi, Buddhist cult etc. are a few examples of his contribution to Buddhist literature. Regarded as a Dharmaguru of North-East India, he was conferred the title of "Agga Mahapandit Dharmaddhwaj" title by the Purbanchal Bhikshu Sangha in the year 2002. At present he is the chairperson of Dibong Buddh Vihara and the president of Purbanchal Bhikshu Sangha. He was a former Principal of Dibong Pali Bidyalaya. A member of Asom Sanskrit Board, Srimat Warnasar Mahather was also a member of the Assam State Selection committee. To spread Buddhism, a number of Singphu Bhikshu have been offering their services at the present time.

Burma Mission : In response to the appeal made by the Principal of the Inthem Buddha Bihar of Assam Oo. Seelbangsha Mahasthvir, to the President of Myanmar, then Prime Minister of Burma under the rule of Unu Government, a group of delegates comprising of a number of dignitaries headed by a Minister, viz., Oo. Wakhin and a member of Missionary Council member Oo. Panyabangsha Sthavir came to Assam in 1950. The team of delegates visited Sadiya, Margherita, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat etc. and observed the condition of the Buddhist people in Assam. Under this mission a number of Bhikkhu lead by Oo. Panyabang set foot in Assam during the Ministry of Gopinath Bordoloi in 1953. These Buddhist gurus were given a grand welcome by the Buddhist community at Margherita. A number of Upasampada Dikkha had been performed in 1953 with the initiatives taken under this Burma Mission. After the Burma Mission the dearth of Bhikkhu in the Buddha Viharas of Assam ended permanently.

The chairman / Principal of Munglang Khamti Buddha Bihar of Lidu in upper Assam, Oo. Gunavanta Mahasthvir was one of the delegates of "Burma Buddha Sasana Mission" that came to Assam in 1953. He is a senior Therevadi Bauddha guru of India and as the "Sangha Nayak" of "Purbanchal Bhikkhu Sangha" he has dedicated his life to propagating the teaching of Buddhism far and wide. For his dedicated services for the expansion of Buddhism he was adorned with the title of "Agra Mahasadamma Jyotika Dhwaja".

Purbanchal Bhikkhu Sangha: After the Burma mission it was felt that a common platform was necessary for the propagation of the teachings of Buddhism. 1971 a resolution was taken at a conference of the Bhikkhus held at Dibong Buddha Vihar to form the "Purbanchal Bhikkhu Sangha". The Bhikkhu Sangha has taken the responsibility to set up Buddh Vihars in those regions where they have not been established and also to appoint a Principal Chairman of the Buddha Vihars.

Purbanchal Bauddha Samiti: In 1985 the "Purbanchal Bauddha Samiti" was formed in the Ningam Bauddha Bihar where Oo. Gunawanta Mahather, the Principal of Munglung Khamti Bauddha Bihar was elected as 'Sangha Nayak' and Warnasar Mahather, the Principal of Dibong Bauddha Bihar as the President. Every year after the "Barshabash Tithi" they gather in a place for a mass prayer and homage to the senior gurus. This rituals is known as "Sangha Kanta Poi" or "Prabavana Utsav". This ritual has been observed by the Purbanchal Bauddha

people of the Singphou, Tai Phake, Tai Khamti, Tai Khamyang, Tangsa, Chakma, Aai Ton, Turung & Nakte communities of the northeast region. For the convenience of conducting this Prabavana Utsav the Buddha Samity has been sub divided into seven regional teams, namely:

1. **Ajat Satru Got:** Guju, Bardumsa, Giding, Lalong, Namleng, Wakhetona, Bisa, Wagun-1, Wagun-3, Dapukh, Magan Tong, Choimou, Balijan, Dirakpotjar, Old Mahong and New Mahong.
2. **Kalasoka Got:** Miao Khasang, Old Jampu, Changlang, New Lichang, Gopin, Jairampur, Tikhap-Taip, Matsom, Rima, and Matwacha.
3. **Ashoka Got:** Ningaam, Phaneng, Kumsaikong, Pangchun, Hachak, Kanda, Phulbari, Modhupur, Bisa.
4. **Battha Gamini Got:** Inthem, Duarmara, Ulup, Pangna and Longphake
5. **Mendung Got:** Munglung, Borphake, Dibong, Ketetong, Manmou, Nongjai, Pawaimukh, Bhiton Pawoi, Margherita, Borgolai, Kuliarbari, Pantari, Banhbari.
6. **Dharmika Got:** Namphake, Tipamphake, Deomali.
7. **Anath pittik Got:** Namsai & Lathao.



An old Buddhist Temple at Ketetong

Poi Sangken



Candel Dana



Chapter – IV

Cultural Life

Singpho Architecture: 'Chang-Ghor'

The main necessities of human beings are food, clothes and shelter. It is known that in very ancient times human beings lived in caves of the hills and the mountains seeking protection from the natural calamities, wild animals and other dangers. In such times people moved from place to place in search of a safe habitat for living and hunting. When they learnt the method of ploughing and agriculture that they settled in places suitable for an agrarian life and it was at such time that they developed the methods of building houses for themselves depending on the raw material available in their surroundings.

In Assam most ethnic communities including the Singphos live in 'Chang-Ghors', which are houses built on stilts. The Singpho community people settle down in a place that is suitable for agriculture and they build 'Chang-Ghors' in rows. The other communities who build 'Chang-ghors' are Khamtis, Tai-Phakes and the Misings. While designing and building their houses they keep many important facts in mind. As they live in very remote places in the midst of jungles and wild animals such houses built on raised platforms protect them from wild animals and other dangers. Also the raw material such as bamboo, wood, and leaves of plants utilised for building the houses are available in plenty in their surroundings. They also keep in mind the health and hygiene of the family in the construction of their houses. The houses are well ventilated and built along north-south directions so that each house receives a good amount of sunlight.

The Singphos have their own vernacular architecture. 'The houses of the Singphos are long shelves, sometimes running to one hundred feet in length with one open balcony at the end where the women sit, spin and weave, embroider and carry out other household chores. The bamboos and wood required for the construction is collected from the forests. To be well protected from strong sunlight and heavy showers the Singphos use the leaves of the 'Tokou-gos', which grows in abundance in their region of habitation for constructing the roof of their Chang-ghors.

After the collection of all the necessary raw materials required for the construction an auspicious day is fixed to start the work of building their home. On this day the village people are invited to participate and help in the building of the house. A feast is organised and everybody extends a helping hand to build the house till it is completed. Such is the unity and cohesion of the Singpho village society.

The Singpho 'Chang-ghars' are built on a raised platform about four to five feet above the ground. The poles of the houses are either of bamboo or of wood. The lintels are of whole bamboos. The walls and the floors are made of woven finely split bamboos, which are closely woven for the walls. While for the floors the weave is such that some space is left in the weave for air to enter and cross ventilate the house. The roof is made of woven palm like leaves of the 'Tokou-gos'.

The Singpho community believe in the concept of joint family and because of this reason the 'Chang-ghar' which is built lengthwise could extend from forty feet to hundred feet providing enough space for a large family. The Chang-ghar has an open space in the front and in the rear portion of the house. The latter being used by the womenfolk of the household for spinning yarn, for weaving, for pounding rice as well as for other household chores. The house has a prayer hall and a spacious kitchen with all the amenities for ethnic cooking and cuisine. The rest of the house is divided into rooms to accommodate the joint family and for receiving guests.

With the advent of science and technology, there has been great strides in the architecture scene of Assam and the traditional 'Assam type' house has been taken over by the modern concrete and steel type of constructions. In such times, however, although there might have crept in some semblance of modern technology yet efforts are on to keep the traditional design and the architecture of the 'Chang-ghor' alive.

Language, Script and Literature

There is an inseparable relationship between Language, Literature and Script of any community. Just as the power to speak is important so is the power to express the thoughts in a written form as the latter allows one to document the thoughts, history and various information for posterity.

The script of the Singpho Language, which belongs to the Tibeto Burmese Language group is not known to all. This has been mentioned in the pages of Arunodoi. Many believe that the Singphos use the script of the Shyans. However this is not true. The Singpho community have their own language, which is completely different from the Shyan language. Although within the Singpho society there are people who are conversant in the Shyan language and script.

The Singphos have their own script, which is the Roman script. There could be many reasons for the Singphos to adopt the Roman script viz. being a community inhabiting the border areas of Assam there could have been some influence on them to take up the Roman script, or because of their people being spread over many frontiers they could have adopted a more common form of script to communicate, also the pronunciation of their language that conforms more to the Roman script. After the adoption of the Roman script the Singphos have made great strides forward in developing their language and literature.

In the ancient times the Singphos had developed their own traditional script which they engraved on the skin of animals. With the passing of time their original script was lost. In the next phase the Singpho community tried to develop and preserve their thoughts through script using leaves, roots, flowers, soil and needle. The change of time and the advent of science had an influence on the Singpho society and they were in search of a modern script for their community.

When the whole of India was under the British rule, the Christian Missionaries entered Assam with the goal of spreading Christianity in the State. They set up a printing press in Sivasagar and initially printed religious books to enlighten the local people on Christianity. Their efforts gave birth to 'Arunodoi' – the first Assamese Magazine which took Assamese language and script to a higher level. It was later when Mr Miles Bronson met the Singpho people that he realised the importance of developing a script for them. It was through his efforts that the Roman script was introduced for the Singpho language. In 1911, the Singpho script prepared by Mr. Bronson was amended by Dr. Ola Hanson and presented in a better form. Dr. Hanson was aware of the rich culture and language of the Singpho people and he collected thousands of Singpho words and published a dictionary in the year 1906 as the 'Dictionary of Kachin Language'. It needs mention here that this community with Tibeto-Burmese language roots was known as the 'Singphos' in India, as 'Kachins' in Burma and as 'Jingphaw' in China. Earlier in 1889 J.F. Needham had published an 'Outline grammar of the Singpho Language as spoken by Singphos, Dowanniyas and others residing in the

neighbourhood of Sadiya'. Major C.R Macgregor had also written 'Grammatical Notes of the Singpho Language'. In this grammar book he also mentioned a list of Singpho and Khamti words. Mr. Nathan Brown and Mr. William Robinson and E.A. Gait had worked towards the documentation of Singpho language and literature.

The Roman script created for the Singpho language was not accepted whole-heartedly by the Singpho society in Assam. On the other hand this script became more popular amongst the Kachins of Burma. The reason being, at that time there was great impact of Christianity on the Singpho society of Kachin. A large section of the Kachins had converted to Christianity from their traditional belief in nature and spirits (Nats). The Christian Missionaries besides uniting them through religious ties also gave them a script, the Roman script, to develop their literature.

Due to lack of proper textbooks the Singpho language did not flourish in Kachin at that time. Between the years 1916-18. Rev. J. F. Ingram prepared textbooks from the primary school level to the level of the University. At that time it was beyond their imagination for the Singphos living in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh to develop a script and literature.

After the First World War, since the year 1920, there was a continuous flow of the Kachin traders from across the Patkai ranges into Assam. It was through the Kachin people who were well versed in the Roman Singpho script and Literature and with whom the Singphos of the eastern borderland of Assam were in continuous touch that the latter were introduced for the second time to the Singpho script. At this juncture the spoken Singpho language had an influence on the eastern border regions of Assam and many other ethnic communities living in these areas had also adopted the Singpho Language as an "Associate Language." Even to this day this impact can still be seen along the border areas.

After the independence, the flow of Kachin Traders to the border region went down. As a result the Singpho script remained confined within a small population. But there was a section of people who were aspirants to the revival of the Singpho language and literature. During 1980s there was a renaissance for the revival of the Singpho language and script under the leadership of the Singpho cultural society. The Cultural Society also took up the task of revival of the art and culture of the Singpho society along with their language and literature. It was through their endeavours that text books at primary school level were published. At present the Singpho Society as a whole is set on taking the initiative of evolving their language and literature forward.

In the mid 1980s when the "Singpho Cultural Society" was working on the revival of the Singpho language a missionary named as Lajum Brang had visited Assam. Lajum Brang was an eminent scholar of Singpho Language. Lajum Brang got the Singpho youths together and gave them lessons on the Singpho script. This programme attracted the elderly members of the community and they too participated in it. Later, he had taught basic lessons on language and literature amongst the Singpho people living in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Thus from the early part of the 1980s along with the Singpho Language and literature there was also an attempt to revive the traditional Singpho songs and dances.

From 1985 the Singphos started celebrating their national festival-'Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi' which has become a common platform to showcase their language, art and culture. Following a demand from such a platform at Arunachal Pradesh the state government of Arunachal Pradesh recognized the Singpho language and introduced it in the curriculum of the schools in the Lohit and Changlung district of the state.

As the government of Assam is yet to recognize the Singpho language as a state language, the Singpho language is confined at present times to only the regions of inhabited by the Singpho community. Without government recognition or aid a model school of their mother tongue viz. "Singphou Matribhasha Bidyalay" has been established at Ketetong, in the Margherita sub-division. The school has been able to draw the attention of people for providing lessons to the Singpho children in their mother tongue. To take this initiative forward an organization called "Singphou Matribhasha Sammittee" was formed. This educational society is being assisted by the Linguistic Department of Gauhati University and an International NGO known as "Summer Institute of Linguistics International." In collaboration with such organizations a series of workshop have been held and text books for the Singpho children in their mother tongue have been written and published.

Singpho Script

A	Ā	E	Ē	E
I	O	U	AI	AU
AW	OI	B	CHY	D
G	GY	H	J	K
KY	HK	HKY	L	M
N	NG	NY	P	HP
HPY	R	S	SH	T
TS	HT	W	Y	Z

Folk Dances of the Singphos

Every tribe or community has its own dance forms, which are grouped into the category of 'folk dance'. It is difficult to predict the age and time of the origin of the folk dance specific to a particular ethnic community. It is presumed that in ancient times when human beings were wandering around in search of food and shelter, when they lived in caves, they would dance around a bonfire merrymaking or performing ritualistic dances. This could be the beginning of folk dance.

The Singphos too have their traditional folk dances and they have certain traditional beliefs associated with their dance forms. The Singpho people believe that 'Mathum Mathai' the creator of the Universe had filled up the world with its beautiful flora and fauna. When the world was adorned with such beauty the birds were intoxicated with the essence of the flowers and the fruits and they performed a dance with the 'hornbill' leading them. In this celebratory dance there was a human being named 'Maung Ding Yau' who was considered fortunate to have got the opportunity to participate in the dance. It is believed that 'Maung Ding' taught the Singpho community the dance form, which he had learnt from the birds.

There are many traditional dance forms of the Singpho people. Although the general dance forms for all of them are similar, each dance form expresses a different meaning, mood and message to all. The different dance forms and the different occasions in which they are performed are given below. The Manaus are of many types:

1. **Si Manau:** On the occasion of the death of a person before the last rites are carried out, the Si Manau dance is performed. This dance - song performance bids farewell to the deceased. The Singpho people believe that on death one should be given a farewell with joy and happiness and therefore on such an occasion everyone conveys their respect to the deceased through the Si Manau and prays for the eternal peace of the soul.
2. **Padang Manau:** The Singphos are a warrior tribe. After a war or conflict the Singphos celebrate their victory by performing the 'Padang Manau' dance. This dance form represents a 'victory dance'. During the World War II when the Japanese were defeated the Kachins performed a Padang Manau for the American and other military forces.
3. **Shut Manau:** This is a dance wherein a person who has acquired riches and fame celebrate by inviting everyone and performing the Sut Manau. Along with the dance the host also arranges for a feast for the invited guests to share his happiness and also get the blessings for their further prosperity in the future.
4. **Dum Manau;** the Singphos are very hospitable by nature. To extend welcome to a guest the Singpho people perform the Dum Manau.
5. **Kumran Manau:** it is a tradition of the Singphos to organise a farewell in a ceremonial manner with the performance of Kumran Manau. When a family member separates from the parental family or shifts or migrates to a new place Kumran Manau is performed.
6. **Kumral Manau:** This dance form is to welcome a very close associate who has been away for a very long time. Such a re-union could bring tears because of nostalgia and therefore Kumral Manau performed at such times brings joy and happiness which is associated with this special occasion.

7. **Ju Manau:** It is a tradition amongst the Singphos to believe in spirits or 'Nats'. Through the Ju Manau they convey their respect to the 'Nats'. They participate in this dance form with great fan-fare and also with lot of reverence for the spirits.
8. **Thonka Manau:** The Singpho people who dwell in the valleys and hills are agrarian. This dance form is closely associated with agriculture. This dance is performed after the harvest of their crops.
9. **Hting Ram Manau:** This dance is to resolve conflicts among relatives. It is an expression of reconciliation and union.
10. **Sut Manau:** This is a particular Manau in the time of prosperity, where friends and relations are invited to share the wealth and prosperity.
11. **Ning Htan Manau :** This Manau is to inspire the people when they are preparing to go to war. They would hold arms, weapons and instruments of war while dancing.
12. **Hting Htang Manau:** This Manau is a celebration of the rich. It lasts for eight days. The Manau ground is prepared in the front and back yard of the house.
13. **Naw Sawt Manau:** This dance is a general one performed in order to get blessings
14. **Kumrun Manau:** This is a dance for people to get together and make merry.
15. **Thingson Manau:** This Manau is performed when a family shifts to a new house
16. **Thonga Manote:** It is performed by the young boys and girls after harvest as a sign of prosperity.

Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi Festival

The Singphos believe that humans evolved from one living organism. With the passage of time the organism split into seven parts, while the tribe is the progeny of the sixth part. Shapawng Yawng — the sixth son in order of birth according to the naming custom of the Singphos — is regarded as the forefather of the tribe.

To commemorate their forefather 'Shapawng Yawng' and for the prosperity of their tribe and other living beings, the Singphos celebrate a dance festival called 'Shapawng Yawng Manau

Poi' every year at the end of the agricultural season. This traditional 'Manau' is a religious festival performed by the Singpho, Jingphaw, Kachin people when they give offerings to the spirit "Madai Nat" (Nat of wealth or prosperity). From time immemorial they have believed in the existence of the Almighty god, the god who is the creator of the whole universe and whose loving care upon all living creatures remains forever.

Manau Poi, meaning a festival of dance, is held in the spring season to welcome nature. Through the celebrations of the Shapawng Yawng Mahau Poi an attempt is made to preserve and extend the art and culture of the Singpho tribe.

The Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi dance festival is generally held in the open air on a huge ground. In the centre there is a set of pillars called 'Shadung' around which the revelers dance and swing to the music. People collect around the "Shadung" and offer prayers to their ancestors and for the welfare of the tribe.

In olden times a pig was buried alive at the premise chosen for the construction of the "Shadung". Five to seven buffaloes were also sacrificed. With the conversion of the Singpho to Buddhism such rituals are now prohibited.

The Shadung has a set of seven or nine tall poles about 20 ft. in height. The two pillars in the middle of the Shadung represent 'dungwi' (femininity) while the pillars near them personify the masculine order "dungla". The shorter pillars are called 'dungnoi' or hanging pillars. They worship the Sun and the Moon, which are placed on the tip of the central pillars and owe to them the vegetation on earth. The Hornbill, which is their national bird, occupies a prominent place in the Shadung.

The whole structure of Manau Pillar appears in such a way that each particular or single pole and pillar has significant value and meaning as given below:

- 1) Dung La (Masculine Pillar)
- 2) Dung Yi (Feminine Pillar)
- 3) Dung Noi- Dung La (Masculine- dung noi)
- 4) Dung Noi- Dung Yi (Feminine- dung yi)
- 5) Dung Noi- Dung La (Masculine- dung noi)
- 6) Dung Noi- dung yi (Feminine-dung noi)
- 7) Dung bye- dung town
- 8) Head of the hornbill

9) Tail of the hornbill

10) Manau Tower (Ginrawng)

The Singphos believe that it was the birds, flitting about filled with the happiness derived from nature in the spring season, which taught them the art of dance. The sword in the Shadung signifies the tool that is used by the Singphos for work as well as for self-protection. The Manau or Dance is led by two leaders. They wear decorated masked caps especially the head of the hornbill. Both the leaders wear long robes embroidered with dragon motifs. They hold a sword each. All those who follow the steps of the leaders hold handkerchiefs in their hands. They dance within a circle- 'Manau Wang' - which surrounds the Shadung. The Manau starts after the unfurling of the festival flag. They encircle the Manau Shadung and dance in groups to the songs & music. The dancing steps follow the spiral lines and designs written in the Manau pillars. After that they branch out and separate and continue to perform the different Manau.

The musical instrument used by the Singphos in Manau Poi is the Ching thong, which is a big and long drum. Bao, which is a gong, Pi a flute and Thongien a Congo. The Ching thong is made of wood and leather.

They begin the festival with 'Gikhin Gumdin Manau', which is a dance of unity. Thereafter, they start dancing all the other dances including the war dances such as Padang Manau and Ning Htan Manau holding swords, spears and guns. On the last day Kumran Manau is performed, as it is a dance performed during departure.

The close proximity to nature and the gregarious nature of the tribe is seen during the festival. The sacrifice of animals to pacify the goddess of Earth in the olden times is now prohibited after their conversion to Buddhism. They worship the Earth along with the flora fauna in it. They believe that the Sun, Moon and the stars were created by the Almighty. These, along with the figures of animals such as elephants, cheetahs, monkeys- buffaloes and water animals like crocodiles; birds like hen, swan and hornbill are imprinted on the plank of the Shadung. The movement of their dances depicts the peaceful motions of birds while flying across the sky in swarms, the motions of butterflies while flying and the movement of fishes as they swim in water in groups.

The different 'Manau' dance forms are an important part of the traditional culture of the Singpho people and the Singpho people have kept it alive to this day. Associated with the traditional dance forms are also the traditional folk songs of the Singphos.

The Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi is celebrated every year either in Arunachal Pradesh or in Assam where the Singpho people from all regions including northern Myanmar and the Yunan Valley participate. This is to keep alive the culture, traditions and the dance forms of the Singpho community.

Singpho traditional weaving and traditional costumes; jewellery and crafts

For any community their traditional costume, jewellery and crafts are an intrinsic part of their identity. The Singpho people have from very ancient times showcased their talents in weaving and in their art related to designs and colours, in their hand crafted jewellery and handicrafts.

It is a tradition in each household of the Singpho community to weave their traditional costumes themselves in their ethnic looms. The womenfolk possess the knowledge and the art of spinning cotton thread and also muga yarn, which they use for weaving their traditional attire for the whole family.

The Singphos have the knowledge of preparing natural dyes, which they use for dyeing their yarn. Such dyes are prepared from various plants and shrubs that grow in their natural habitat. Some of the colours prepared from such natural sources are given below:

1. Muga colour dye which is a golden colour is prepared from the bark of the 'Bogori' plant
2. Orange - yellow colour dye is prepared from the bark of the Jack fruit tree
3. Orange colour dye is prepared from the bark of the "tepor Tenga" tree
4. Black colour dye is prepared from the bark and the seeds of the "Hilikha" tree
5. Beige colour dye is prepared from the bark of the "Amlokhi" tree

In present times however synthetic dyes are being used to dye the yarn used for weaving. The Singpho women are very artistic and they weave motifs, colours and designs, which have their own symbolic meanings, and legends associated with them and they also depict the environment and nature around them. They weave floral motifs and the designs display a combination of lines, triangles, diamonds, and other geometrical forms.

The yarn used for weaving is generally prepared by weavers themselves. They grow cotton in their houses and spin the yarn themselves. The other kind of yarn they use is the 'Nai Ri',

which is known as Muga, and the dresses made of Muga are costly and precious and are worn mostly for ceremonial occasions.

The weavers use different types of looms for weaving their traditional clothes. For weaving the traditional bags (M'pheng) and waist belt (Chingket) the weavers use a special type of loom, which is the traditional loom. The weavers weave sitting on the floor with the loom strapped around their waist with a belt made of animal skin. For other traditional dresses including the mekhala for the women i.e. Pukang, which are of two types, Bukang & Bathang, and Nungwot, the turban (Tatot Bum-Bam), the lungé (Baka), the weavers use the usual loom which has greater width than the traditional loom

The menfolk of the Singpho community too have their traditional costume. They wear a 'Bopa or Baka', a lungi which is woven with the intricate weaving of different coloured cotton yarns. The traditional costume of the menfolk consists of the lungée (Baka) which are woven with checks of intricate designs and of different coloured yarns. They wear a shirt, which is either of white or black colour of a special design, and a turban on their head called (Tatot Bum-bam). On their shoulder they carry a sling bag called 'Kumphrong Npheng' adorned with silver crafted decorations and on the same shoulder they carry a 'Pyaudau' (a sword) and a 'Nthu' (a heavy metallic knife). The lungées can be distinguished from one another according to the different designed checks and colours and they have different names too. The different types of lungées are given below:

1. Patep: Woven with red, black and white yarn, white being the predominant colour.
2. Bamo: Made of 'Na Ri' yarn of colour bottle green, violet, sky blue and black.
3. Phochyung: made of black, violet, white and green yarn.

Like the Singphos, the Tai Khamti and the Tai Phake communities also wear lungées although there is a distinct difference in the colours and the designs amongst the lungées of the different communities. The Singpho "Bopa" is woven with the mixture of black and green yarns.

The Singpho men wear a traditional "Phambam" or turban on their head and the girls wear it as a scarf. The "Phambam" consists of a narrow and long piece of cloth of a variety of colours and woven with intricate designs and which is wound around the head three times and then a knot is tied at one side of the head so that one end of the "Phambam" hangs along the right side of the head. In the Kachin region of Myanmar the head gear is around the hair

bun that they tie with their hair is seen above the head gear. Like the menfolk the Singpho women also wear a cloth around their head.

The men wear a blue or black coloured jacket. Beside this outfit there is also a costume called 'Yang Pho Long' which is worn by the "Dua" i.e. the head or chief of the communities

Every woman in a Singpho household knows the art and technology of weaving. When a girl child comes of age she is trained in the art of weaving. The mother plays an important role in training her daughter to weave not only her own clothes but also for the other members of the family. In order to take the tradition of weaving from generation to generation a bride carries a loom with her from her parents' household when she moves to her in-laws place after her marriage. The verandah of the 'Chang ghaar' is the appointed place for the lady to weave.

The Singpho community is spread over a large area covering the north-eastern border of Assam, in Arunachal Pradesh, North Myanmar, China and Thailand. In accordance with the weather and climatic conditions over the different regions in which they reside, their costumes vary in style, texture and weaves. The Singpho ladies adorn two types of traditional costume namely "Kha Khu Khring" and "Man Mou Khring". The Singpho ladies of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh wear the "Kha Khu Khring". They wear "Pukang" a 'mekhala' or a wrap-around, "Nuwat" a piece of garment worn as a top and a "Singket" which is a piece of woven narrow cloth to wrap around the waist. They wear short-sleeved blouses. On certain ceremonial occasions they also wear a top called "Komphong Polong" adorned with beautiful ornamental silver work. "Pukang" is woven with different naturally dyed cotton yarns of various colours. Also the clothes worn by married and unmarried girls differ so that they can be distinguished on the basis of the clothes they wear. Nungwat (a kind of mekhala) is worn only by married ladies

The traditional costume "Man Mou Khring" is generally worn in cold and windy regions as this form of costume keeps one warm. As the climatic conditions in eastern region of Assam and in Arunachal Pradesh is not extremely cold this kind of costume is not generally worn although the ladies adorn 'Man Mou Khring' on special occasions such as when they take part in the dance performance during the "Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi" festival.

There are different types of 'Pukang' (mekhela). The different names of the 'Pukang' are according to the different colours of the yarn used and also the design of the stripes on it. Some of the names of the 'Pukang' are given below:

1. Mikheng Pukang: Woven with red, black and green yarn. The red and black stripes are broader than the green ones.
2. Mathat Pukang: The base colour of the cloth is black with intermediary thin white stripes.
3. Muksya Pukang: The base colour is black and it has thin stripes of green and violet. It is of Muga yarn and it is used specifically for the Ceremonial occasions.

The Singphos do not have separate ceremonial costumes but for a weddings the bride and the groom adorn a long cloak decorated with beautiful designs over their traditional costumes. This cloak is generally purchased from Myanmar, erstwhile Burma.

On the occasion of the death of a person, family members and the relatives presents a hand woven piece of cloth called "Mijip Umbah" to pay their last respects and to bid farewell to the dead. Many members of the Singpho community have embraced Buddhism in recent times. As such a tradition known as "Kothin Sibor daan" is performed on the occasion of death. For such an occasion the weavers have to weave overnight the traditional cloth that is to be laid on the body of the dead. Thus weaving is also related to and a part of the religious traditions in the Singpho community.

Jewellery: The Singpho ladies wear ornate jewellery mostly made of silver and beads, which they adorn on special ceremonies and occasions. The Singpho ladies wear jewellery to match their traditional costumes during special occasions which consist of 'Suwanang' - a necklace made of semi-precious stones ('Deo-moni') obtained from northern Burma, 'Kumphrong Lakhon'-silver bangles and 'Kunphrong Lakchawp'- silver earrings. The elderly ladies have jewellery to match their traditional ceremonial clothes. They wear 'Pat Lakan' which are exotic heavy earrings made of precious stones called 'Jang-phai'. Also their clothes and the sling bags are adorned with beautifully crafted silver decorations.

The beauty of their traditional costumes is enhanced by the jewellery that they wear and the silver work crafted into their clothes and accessories.

Crafts: As far as weaving is concerned it is mainly the womenfolk who are engaged in this traditional art form. The Singpho men are known for their skills in traditional handicrafts. They use bamboo, cane and wood to design and make products such as baskets and other articles of daily use and need. Some of the products of their crafts and handiwork are given below:

1. Sumbu: Bamboo container for the storage of rice
2. Signoi: Basket
3. Karan: Basket for carrying firewood
4. Enthot: Bamboo Mug
5. Phalon: Tea Cups
6. Kinsang: Basket for keeping clothes
7. Lukung: Spoons
8. N'thu Ningang: Sword case
9. They make many more vessels for the storage of liquor and water

The Singpho community's endeavour to assert and keep alive their identity and culture by keeping up the traditions of weaving and adorning of traditional costumes is note worthy. The traditional costume of a community represents its identity. Assam a mosaic of ethnic communities represents various and varied cultures, religions and languages. The ethnic costumes of each community are a means of identifying a community from the rest. In present times when there is a surge for revival and resurgence of ethnic cultures and traditions the members of the communities adorn their traditional costumes not only within their gated community but also when representing themselves in the world outside their own.

Folk Songs of the Singpho people

The songs and renditions of ancient times are depicted as folk songs of today. As in the case of the folk dance, in the case of the folk songs too it is difficult to predict the age and times that they originated. Amongst many different types of folk songs some of them are:

1. Mam htu Soiwa
2. Sayaw Goi Ningkin
3. Hka Yawng Ningkin

Inspite of their busy and tough agrarian life that they lead, the Singpho people have kept alive their songs and music by performing them in their leisure time. After the harvest when the Singpho ladies pound the rice outside their 'Chang Ghar' in their traditional pounding equipment the motions of the pounding pole are rhythmic and along with the rhythm the ladies involuntarily hum a tune and break into a song. This is the Mam htu Soiwa.

Such songs are sometimes extempore and they express many thoughts related to their lives. Others join in and they carry on the pounding along with the singing session late into the night. The rhythm of the pounding synchronizes with their singing.

'Sayaw Goi Ningkin' folk songs express love, tragedy and description of a person or other inanimate objects. While the songs bring to light love and affection so does the songs portray the incomparable beauty of the nature and environment. The songs also portray the life story of people and they are extempore presentations in poetic versions.

There is a close association of the Singphos with rivers. The river is a common and reliable form of communication for the Singphos. When they are sailing in their boats the Singpho boatmen naturally break out into a song. Such songs are known as the Hka yawng Ningkin. When they are going downstream it is a tradition to sing the Hka Yawng Ningkin songs till they reach their destination. These folk songs are stories, which are recited in the form of a song, and they express many historical facts as well as any other matter in a very descriptive manner.

A few folk songs are given below with their interpretations in Assamese.

Mam htu soi wa

Yoi sa yoi sa.

Ja hkawn sawi mhpawng dam hkau htu na re law yoi sa.

Ya pru manam pru nang dai law yoi sa yoi sa.

Ngai htu mam gaw mprang rai naw yoi sa yoi sa.

Sa na manam mawng yang rain aw yoi sa yoi sa.

Yoi sa sala dam htumechin ma di gaw yoi sa mhpawng dam hkau kawng sarawt dig aw yoi sa yoi sa.

Mhpawng dam mam e rau htu I gaw.

Yoi sa mhpawng i gaw n sa mu.

Yoi sa n ngut di gaw n da mu yoi sa.

Yoi sa yoi lu e yoi sa.

E law maràm numnang ni e sa yoi sa.

Maihting dam htangmun sarawt di gaw yoi sa.

Yoi sa soi wa dam numpot sarawt di gaw yoi sa yoi sa.

মামুখচয়রা

য়চা যচা

আমি মহিলা সকলে খুন্দো 'ইক্ষুংধান'

ঘৰলৈ এতিয়া অতিথি আহিছে

অতিথিক খুৱাবলৈ

আমি খুন্দো চালা গছৰ খুন্দুনাত

আমি খুন্দো চাউল

সকলো মিলি খুন্দো

আমি খুন্দো ইক্ষুংচাউল

আমি গাওঁ ধান খুন্দা গীত

খুন্দা বান্ধৰী খুন্দা চাউল খুন্দা

চাউল খুন্দা খুন্দুনাতো হৈছে নাহৰগছৰ খুৰা।

Sayaw Goi Ningkin

Se sasen htawng ning ang e de mu

Ningnam chawm du a dai chawm pru a.

E sayaw goi dum chawm sa ngu a dai chawm ngu a.

Ye ngai sayaw goi dum gaw ngai n choi

a e ngai choi a e dai tim mung gaw i na dabam

sa bum nawn loi ma hpoi kaw e

chawm hpoi kaw.

E i na dabam sa bum nawn gaw i na dabam

Sa bum nawn gaw.

Se panjet sata na chawm hkung nga de

chawm hung nga

E mung ching dam tingtang chawm hung nga dai

chawm hung nga.

E i na dabam sa bum nawn e i na dabam

sa bum nawn e.

E lamu sa kintawng nan chawm htai ha.

E mung ching dam tingtang i maroi e

dai maroi.

E ja hkawn kaidim gaw e dabam sa bum

nawn chawm nga dai na chawn nga.

Ye sasen htawng ning ang chawm pra e

chawm pra e mungdu sa hkawn

chum chawm nga e chawm nga.

E piaw piaw maga piaw piaw maga i na

darap lung hpungga chawm gau paiw e
mung kang sa hkawnglu mu gai saa
law gai saa.
Law manun hkawng dabam e gau gaja
a law gau gaja a.
E ja hkawn kaidim gaw e dabam sa ye
ja hkawn sa ningkin chawm madat kaw e
chawm madat kaw.
E moi dung sa salang ni masat kaw.
E moi dung sa hkawn ni gaw chagu sa jaw
di hkai chapawm a dai chapawm a.
E mawin sa singyaw mung gau chawm
a dai gau chawm a.
Law se masum sawn sairu e njaw gup
a dai njaw gup moi dung sa hkawn
ni moi dung sa hkawn.
E lacha joi gai li e singda tup wa dai
singda tup wa.
Je moi dung sa hkawn ni gaw moi dung sa hkawn ni.

চিয়গ'ই গীত
দেখাত ধুনীয়া আৰু শূৰনী
'চিচেন' এলেকা।
চিয়গ'ইগীতে অধিক মনোমোহা কৰি তোলে
মই গাব নাজানো চিয়গ'ইগীত
কিঞ্চ গীত বচিছো
'ডুবাম' পাহাৰৰ মানুহৰ গান।
পূৰ্ণিমাৰ জোনে পোহৰাই তুলিছে
পোহৰাই তুলিছে চৌদিশ
সৌন্দৰ্যৰ নতুন সমাহাৰ।
ঐ ডুবাম পাহাৰৰ মানুহ ঐ ডুবাম পাহাৰৰ মানুহ
গ্ৰহ-নক্ষত্ৰবোৰ তিববিৰাই আছে
আলোকিত কৰিছে চৌদিশ
ধুনীয়া সম্ভ্ৰান্ত ঘৰৰ ছোৱালী জনীয়ে বনাহম
ডুবাম পাহাৰৰ বুকুত।
এটি সুন্দৰ উপহাৰ
শূৰনী আৰু ভাল লগাবোৰৰ
মই এটি গীতৰ কলি শুনিছো
বহুদিনৰ স্মৃতি মনলৈ ঘূৰি আহিছে
ছোৱালী জনীয়ে আগ বঢ়াইছিল এবাতি বাগী
ভাইক দেখাত ধুনীয়া লাগিছিল
পিন্ধিছি লগহনা
লেঘেৰী খোপাগহনাৰে সজাই তুলিছিল
যাৰমূল্যে শটামুদ্ৰাৰ সমান।
(চিচেন – চিংফৌ সকলৰ এটি গোত্ৰৰ নাম)
(ডুবামপাহাৰ – চিংফৌসকলৰ কাষত থকা পাহাৰ)

Due to a wave of modern songs sweeping over the traditional folk songs there is a threat that the latter may die out. However the Singpho community is aware of it and there has been an attempt to revive and document their folk songs.

N.B : The two Singpho songs Mam htu Soiwa and the Sayaw Goi Ningkin given above are the composition of Jaon koh Imphang of Inthem village and Gudung Lung Bisa of Bisa Gaon respectively.

Ethnic Singpho Cooking and Cuisine

The Singpho Cuisine is distinct from any other cuisine of the different communities of Assam. The cuisine and the food habits of a particular community or group is dependent on the geographical location, the environment and the natural crops in their local habitat, resources available and also to their indigenous tastes and flavours. The Singpho community are located in the regions which are hilly and mountainous and rich in biodiversity. Therefore the traditional food that the Singpho community prepare consists mainly of green leafy and other naturally growing vegetables and the food is flavoured with a variety of herbs gathered from the thick jungles around their habitat.

The Singphos are non-vegetarian and they prepare fish and meat dishes which are a part of their cuisine. The non-vegetarian food is cooked by many different ways as given below :

1. **Supung** : This non vegetarian item is stuffed into the hollow part of a bamboo and then cooked.
2. **Ki-ee** : Cooked or steamed wrapped up in palm or other leaves
3. **Ping** : Cooked in skewers
4. **Ubong** : In this procedure the non-vegetarian item is steamed

The vegetarian cuisine contains dishes which are prepared from a wide variety of vegetables including many leafy vegetables, roots, seeds, stems and shoots of various plants and shrubs and herbs, some of which are given below :

Reisi: the tender shoot of cane plant

Kngu- josi: Banana Flower

Kuwa muku: the tender shoot of the bamboo plant

Ding-gosi : A variety of palm

Nadang si: String beans

Na- ee: Kosu

Jing Khang: a local form of Bok Choi

Sabasi: Brinjal

Besides the above vegetables there are many other vegetables, plants and herbs locally available that are incorporate into their ethnic cooking and cuisine. A distinctive fact about Singpho cooking is that they do not use oil in cooking their traditional dishes. The spices that they use are very different from those used by the people of the Assam valley and the rest of the country. The Singpho cuisine has its distinctive flavours which the Singpho ladies create in their exotic and organic food by adding the traditional spices and herbs that they prepare from the leaves, roots, seeds and shoots of a variety of plants and shrubs known to them and which they gather from the jungles or grow them in their kitchen gardens in their back yard.

Some of the Spices and herbs that are used in Singpho cooking are given below in the Singpho language:

1. "Masang": the leaves and seeds of the Masang tree are used. When the seeds of this plant mature, they are collected and ground in their traditional grinder.
2. "Khe-banji": grown in their kitchen gardens
3. "Banji" (a form of cilantro): grown in their compounds
4. "Natangban": grown in their kitchen garden
5. "Ban Kho Ban": grown by themselves in their garden
6. Sumbrong-Mukung: collected from the forests
7. Singlap: gathered from the jungles
8. Tukhalap: from the forests.

The Singphos also eat the leaves of a number of plants and trees. Some of them being "Nephaphu: " Mamimuni" " Bhadailota". Mushrooms are very often used in the Singpho cuisine.

The staple food of the Singphos is rice. The special traditional rice grown by the Singphosis cooked and served in a traditional manner. A Singpho meal is served on a low table and the members of the family and guests sit on the floor and eat their meals. Elaborate meals are served and the manner of serving of the food is in itself very appetising. The rice is served wrapped in a palm leaf called "koupat" known as " Saat Makai" or " tupula bhaat" served with a variety of delicious traditional Singpho dishes both vegetarian and non-vegetarian.

The method of making rice and the hygienic manner in which it is wrapped up in the 'Koupat' without touching it with the fingers to serve it as 'tupula bhaat' merits mention. The rice is made in a special steamer called the " bumuq-pungkhu". The lower section of the steamer 'Bumuq' is filled with water and the rice, which is soaked in water for 3 to 4 hours, is placed in the upper section 'Pungkhu' for steaming. To prevent leakage of steam the steamer is wrapped with a soaked piece of cloth. Water is sprinkled once or twice on the rice so that the rice is properly cooked. The cooked rice is then transferred to and spread on a split bamboo woven tray called a 'Golam' (in Singpho) or 'Dola'(in Assamese) for it to cool down. The rice is then wrapped up in 'Koupat' and served. "Miya tong" and "Pikhisengkhou" (in Singpho) are the two types of rice that are used for making steamed rice. A traditional dish that is made out of steamed rice is served as a snack. The steamed rice is mixed with salt and sesame powder and left in a loft over the fireplace to dry. Rice balls are made out of it and barbequed in the fire and served.

The Singphos also have a traditional way of making rice by cooking the rice in a hollow bamboo over the fire .The rice used for such preparation is sticky in texture and known as "Supung Saat".

Every lady in a Singpho household is an accomplished cook who has all the traditional knowledge of the different traditional ingredients, herbs and spices and vegetables that are to be incorporated in the cooking of their varied ethnic dishes. One of their favourite ethnic dishes of the Singphos is fish cooked with the leaves of 'Uriam' tree and the tuber of arum plant along with various other ingredients. The fish is cleaned and scaled and deboned. The fish is then mixed with herbs and spices such as the seeds and the leaves of the 'Masang', "Ban Kho Ban", dried red pepper, ginger and garlic, salt water and the mixture is pounded.

Boiled and mashed potatoes or boiled arum is mixed along with the juice of the leaves of the 'Uriam' plant and the prepared mixture is placed in a large vessel. This dish is served with great pride to entertain guests and respectable persons.

The Singphos cook meat dishes in different ways. The traditional dishes are skewered meat pieces marinated in salt and barbequed and meat marinated in 'masang' spice and various herbs and wrapped in several folds of 'Koupat' and barbequed in fire. The latter marinated meat can also be put into hollow bamboo pieces and steamed in boiling water.

A traditional drink of the Singphos is the 'Sapup' or rice beer. This traditional drink is also related to their religious beliefs and served to the Deities and spirits that the Singpho people believe in. In recent times most Singphos practise Buddhism and such practices have been lost. In present times it is the Singpho tea " Phalap" that is more commonly served to guests and amongst themselves.

The Singpho people have the knowledge of preservation of food both vegetarian and non-vegetarian. To preserve meat they cut it into small pieces, mixed with salt and rice and packed tightly into hollow bamboos and can be kept for a few days .This procedure is known as 'Paatik'. They have the art of also preserving fish for a long period of time. The fish is cut into small pieces and mixed with salt and rice and packed into bamboo hollow tube and left for 4 to 5 days when it turns sour. This fish is known as 'Nga Saan Siki'. This method of preservation of fish is also carried out by the Tai Khamti and the Tai-phake community.

The Siingpho ladies also preserve the tender shoot of the bamboos in different forms such as the sour fermented bamboo shoot 'Mikhisi' in Singpho or 'khorisa tenga'(in Assamese), in the dried form 'Mikhisumban" in Singpho or 'xukan Khoris'a in Assamese, fermented bamboo shoot liquid 'Mikhi khu' in Singpho and 'Khorisa Rokh' in Assamese. In the same manner they preserve 'Lai Sag' (a traditional form of Bok Choi) by cutting it into small pieces and drying it in sunlight for 1 to 2 days and then mixing it with the strained water of cooked rice. This is packed into the hollow bamboos till it turns sour. This preparation is known as 'Sing Khang Mikhi' and it can be preserved for a long time. The Singphos also know the art of making dry fish which is a delicacy amongst them.

It is a known fact that the vegetables, spices and herbs that the Singpho ladies use for their cooking contains a lot of medicinal value. From time immemorial the Singpho people have had very healthy food habits. Their diet incorporating healthy organic and natural food and

crops, and healthy and hygienic mode of cooking. It is said that every item in their diet has extra ordinary amount of medicinal value.

The Singpho calendar

The lives, culture, traditions and beliefs of the Singpho people are associated with the environment and nature in their place of habitation. In the prediction of the seasons and in working out their annual calendar the Singphos go by the changes of the weather and the flora and fauna.

Thus the year is divided into two main seasons the dry season or the 'Ginhawng Ta' or 'Khorali' and the wet season or the 'Yunam' or 'Barixa'. The dry season is from the month of October to March and the wet season from April to September. The Singpho year is divided in twelve months namely: Kala, Maji, Maga, Hkru, Ra, Wut, Shala, Johtum, Shangan, Shimari, Gupsi and Guptung.

The Singpho people with their association with nature are very observant of the changes in flora-fauna due to climatic changes. The different months of the year are associated with the observed changes in the natural environment as given below:

1. **Kala:** when the 'kala' flower blooms.
2. **Maji:** the period during which the 'Maji' plant is blooming
3. **Maga:** when the 'Maga' shrub sheds its leaves
4. **Hkru:** the planetary position of the moon when they have enough to eat
5. **Ra:** the time when the 'Ra' tree is blooming
6. **Wut:** when the 'Wut' creeper is blooming.
7. **Shala:** the time when the 'Shala' tree blooms
8. **Johtam:** the end of a hot season moon
9. **Shangam:** the moon during which people suffer from Malaria and other illnesses
10. **Shimari:** the wet moon
11. **Gupsi:** the moon during which they have a very wet season
12. **Guptung:** the wettest season of the year.

The days of the month are calculated with relation to the size and position of the moon. The first of the month to the fourteenth day is calculated and depicted as the 'Pra' or the 'Xuklopoikho' (in Assamese). During this period they observe the waxing of the moon. The fifteenth day is the day of the full moon or 'Purnima'. From the sixteenth day to the twenty

ninth day they observe the waning of the moon and this period is known as the 'Ruum' or 'Krishno poikho' (in Assamese).the thirtieth day is the day of no moon known as 'Stahtum' or 'Omo boishya' (in Assamese)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

(Pra)

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30

(Ruum)

The week in a Singpho calendar consists of seven days. The days of the week are denoted in the Singpho calendar as numbers from one to seven and are given as:

1 st day	'Aina'	Monday
2 nd day	'E- Khong ya'	Tuesday
3 rd day	'Musum ya'	Wednesday
4 th day	'Mili ya'	Thursday
5 th day	'Manga ya'	Friday
6 th day	'Khru ya'	Saturday
7 th day	'Sinit ya'	Sunday

The Gun Culture and the Singpho Society

A community that is connected from very ancient times with the culture of war-fare, arms and ammunitions and a community that derives satisfaction by going into war with their enemies is no other that the 'Singpho' community. A brave and warrior community the use of gun and warfare is woven into their culture and traditions. The Singphos inhabiting the remote areas of the eastern borders of the Assam Province were known to the British as a fierce and warlike tribe and the colonists were apprehensive of the Singpho community! The Singpho people also possessed the tactics of guerrilla warfare, which was unknown to the British.

Living in very remote and dense forest regions for the Singphos the gun is a part of their life and lifestyle. When moving out of the household on an errand or travelling from one place to another, a Singpho is apprehensive of the many dangers that he may encounter and it is a second nature to sling the hand made gun on his shoulder for self-protection.

The making of the gun is an ancient practice and is an intrinsic part of their cultural and social moorings. Based on such social traditions the Singpho society even to this day believe in the tradition of presenting a hand-made gun amongst other goods as 'bride price' in a Singpho wedding. As soon as a child is born the newborn is welcomed with the sound of gunfire. On the occasion of death the gun is fired to bid a respectful farewell to the dead. The villagers are also informed of the death through the sound of gunfire and sounding of the metallic gongs. These are deep traditions that are engraved into the fabric of their culture.

From very ancient times the Singphos knew the art of making Guns and Gunpowder. They had the scientific knowledge of mixing chemicals to make gun powder/ ammunitions for their self-made guns. The ingredients required for making gunpowder are all natural products which they acquire from their households and the forests. It is prepared with a lot of care and caution by applying their traditional techniques and scientific methods. The gun powder is then stored in hollow bamboos

Every household possess their self hand made gun. In recent times guns can be owned only on being provided with a license issued by the government. The Singphos conform to such rules and retrictions. Although the Singpho people are very keen on preserving their ancient traditions, both cultural and social, with the change of times and situations certain traditions such as the gun culture will probably die a natural death.

Chang-Ghor



Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi Festival



Handlooms



Traditional Singpho weaving



Traditional Singpho Costumes

Ceremonial attire





Singpho Jewellery



Singpho Craft Items



U-rong



Signoi



Sing-kaq



N-dum



Iahpun



Hpalap



Golam



Jum Ndum



Kaihtum Yawn



Lakap

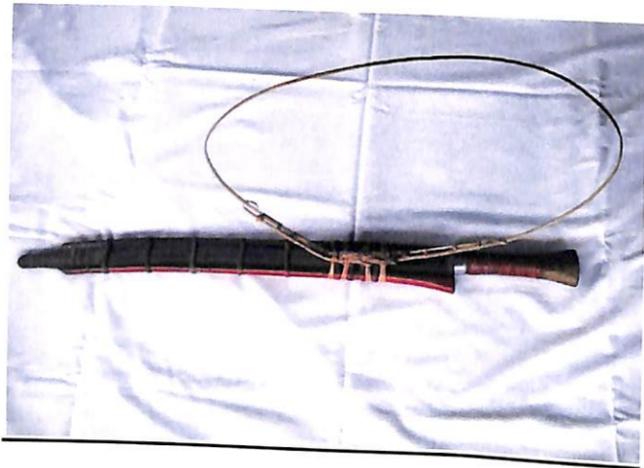
Traditional Musical Instruments



Bumuq Pungku



Sat makai, n-tsin si, shan ping



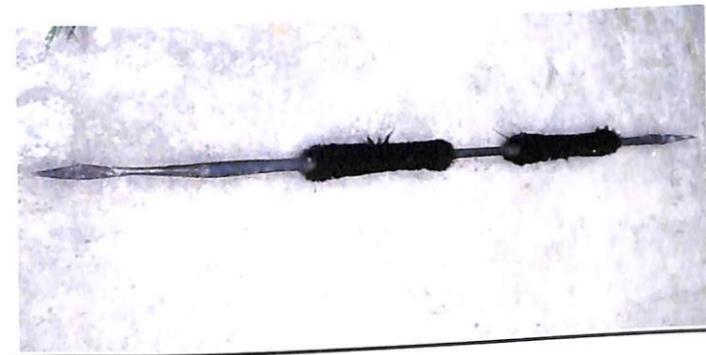
Nthu



Nap



Ningri



Chapter- V

Economic and Political Organization

Traditional Livelihood Patterns of the Singpho Community

A warrior hill tribe, the Singphos earned their living cultivation, hunting wild animals and fishing in the past. Due to the prohibition of killing of wild animals and also due to their conversion to Buddhism, which prohibits sacrifice and killing, they no longer hunt animals although they still practice their art of fishing. Their traditional method of cultivation was the slash-and-burn system of cultivation of hill paddy. In this method trees of a locality are cut down to clear the ground for cultivation and the womenfolk engage themselves in planting and harvesting. Under this system of cultivation, a paddy field in a hill area can be used for cultivation only for a year or two and then the area had to be abandoned for a period of 9 to 10 years. Jhum cultivation has however been banned in recent times as it leads to deforestation and heavy damage to the ecology of the hills..

Traditionally the Singpho people are agrarian and to this day their main form of livelihood is agriculture. They have close association with their environment and their life and livelihood, culture and social moorings all revolve around their natural habitat. Their knowledge of traditional food crops, herbs and medicinal plants, natural dyes all relate to their natural place of living in the remote areas which are covered by dense forests or are of mountainous terrain.

Although the traditional mode of cultivation of the Singphos was Jhum cultivation they have now taken up wet cultivation. Rice is their staple food and cultivation of paddy is their main form of agriculture. They plough the land with the help of cows and buffalos although the traditional method of ploughing in earlier times was with the help of the elephant. The Singphos have had a close association with the elephant from very ancient times and the elephant was the main means of transport for the Singphos.

With the onset of the monsoon season the Singphos plough their fields. Their traditional species of paddy such as 'Mia tong' and 'Kowji', 'Kholung' and others are grown in their fields. These species are very rare varieties and they need to be conserved.

After the rice is harvested it is stored in the granary in their own house for the whole year. After the harvest is over the Singpho household celebrates the good harvest by holding a

feast. Each family invite their relatives and neighbours to a "Nao Khuwa" in which the rice from the fresh harvest is served.

With the change of time the Singpho people have also become aware of the modern, scientific and time saving techniques of agriculture thereby using motor ploughs to plough their land before planting the rice saplings.

Besides growing paddy the Singphos also cultivate bamboo groves and a kind of palm called "Tokougos" and other crops which are being used by themselves and also serve as cash crops. Other crops that are grown to earn livelihood are oranges, bananas and betel nut. The palm like leaf of the "Tokougos" which is used for the construction of the roof of the traditional Singpho "Chang-ghors" is grown extensively in the villages of Dibong, Ketetong, Inthem, Kusai Kong and Pangsun. An organised system of cultivation of the 'Tokougos' will have great prospects for a profitable livelihood.

Another cash crop that is being introduced to the Singpho community in recent times is the rubber plant. Many community people are now looking at the prospects of earning a livelihood through rubber plantations, which seem to be doing well in their regions. However such cultivations in vast stretches of land could be at the expense of losing some rare species of trees, plants and herbs indigenous to these regions and to the community.

It is a well known fact that the tea bush was first introduced by Bisa Gam, a Singpho Chief, to Robert Bruce. The Singphos were not associated actively with the tea industry of Assam although the tea bush grew wild in their traditional habitat and 'Phalap' or the tea that they brewed was an intrinsic part of their culture and life. It was only when the 'small tea growers' or the 'Green leaf growers' were recognised by the tea industry that the Singphos took to planting the tea bushes with the intention of making a livelihood. The traditional tea bush of the Singpho community grows wild without any manure or pesticides and the Singpho people pluck the tea leaves and preserve them in their traditional manner. The organic cup of tea that is made from the Singpho tea leaves is known as "Phalap". However with the destruction and the loss of environment this special species of the tea bush which grows naturally and which was the one first given to Robert Bruce is dying out and the Singphos feel that it is important to conserve this species of the Tea bush.

Many Singpho families in recent times are growing tea bushes in an organised manner in the available land around their households and earning from the sale of the green leaves. Clearing

out the land around their households for growing tea bushes has also lead to loss of many indigenous herbs and shrubs. Also pesticides when used leads to the deterioration of the soil quality as well as there is a compromise on the quality of the tea.

While there is an internationally demand and market for organic products, the Singpho tea, which is traditionally organically grown, has a great prospect in the world market if it can be grown in an organised manner and marketed internationally. In 2006, a Singpho tea planter Rajesh Singpho introduced the organically grown and traditionally prepared Singpho tea leaves to an international market in Canada where the export brands of organic tea and coffee were displayed. This has inspired the members of the Singpho community to take up organic tea plantation. Besides the Canada the Korean and Japanese tea market is showing keen interest in the Singpho organic tea as reported by the small tea growers of the Singpho community.

Another great potential amongst the Singpho community is their traditional knowledge of the medicinal plants and herbs. The natural habitat around them is a store- house of plants, shrubs and herbs whose medicinal values are known to the Singpho community and which are used by them to treat the sick and also incorporated in their daily diet and cuisine. The “Eco-lodge” at Inthong (Ketetong) is a centre for projecting the cultural and traditional knowledge of the Singpho people. The cuisine that is served in this cultural hub portrays the culinary expertise and the knowledge of herbs and spices of the Singpho womenfolk, which are incorporated into their daily diet.

Along with the medicinal plants and their knowledge of ethnic medicinal healing, the traditional species of their paddy too has a great potential for marketing outside their region and also internationally and could lead to a profitable livelihood. Two species of traditional Singpho paddy namely, the “Mia Tong” and “Kholung” have been registered under the ‘The Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers’ Rights Act, 2001’.

There are great potential within the Singpho people themselves and in the environment around them which can be tapped and harnessed with a focus for creating livelihood projects for the Singpho in the future.

Political organizations

The Singpho National Council evolved as an organization to monitor social and economic development and ways to empower the Singpho society in the early eighties of the last

century. The main initiative of the Singpho National Council was to liaise between the Singpho people living in the far east of the State with the State Government and to bring to focus the social and economic problems faced by the community and to formulate remedies in consultation with the Government.

Later, in 2011 the Government of Assam constituted the Development Council for the Singpho, Tangsa, Sema and the Mon Tai speaking communities of Assam, namely, the Tai-Phake, Tai Aiton, Tai Turung, Tai Khamiyang and Tai Khamti for the social, economic and cultural development of all the communities under a Chairman and a body of Executive members. The reason that all the eight communities were clubbed together to form the council is that the population numbers of all these communities are very small, the Singpho community having the highest population of 10-15 thousand at present.

Singpho Tea Industry : A Special Note

Assam takes great pride in its Tea industry along with that of Oil and Coal. The contribution of the Singphos to the Tea Industry is remarkable. From time immemorial the Singphos who inhabited either side of the Patkai range had the knowledge of the tea bush and their

indigenous methods of brewing 'Phalap' or Tea from the tender leaves of the tea shrub. The Singpho community to this day follow their own traditional organic ways of growing the tea bush, producing the tea leaves and preserving them. 'Phalap' is a traditional drink for the Singphos and they believe that it has great medicinal value. Even in the present times Tea is considered to be rich in anti-oxidant and considered a health drink.

Although "Phalap" has its own indigenous flavours and could not compete with the modern cup of tea, Phalap has come into prominence as the Singphos grow tea organically and without the use of fertilizers or pesticides.

The history behind the discovery of the Tea bush in Assam leading to the path of establishing of tea plantations and its industry which to this day bring foreign exchange to a great extent is indebted to the Singpho community.

Robert Bruce, a Scottish trader and explorer visited Rangpur, the Ahom Capital in Upper Assam in the year 1823 and many times after that, his sole intention being to meet Bessa Gaum, the Chief of one of the principal indigenous tribes of North-east India, the Singphos, in connection with Tea.

Maniram Datta Barua, a native nobleman, had apprised Bruce of the fact that the Singphos grew many varieties of tea, which were unknown to the world outside theirs. Bruce was keen to befriend the Singpho tribe before he collected the plants and the seeds. In those times China had a monopoly over the tea trade in the world. Bruce realised that if the tea that the Singphos possessed was of good quality Assam could rival China. His meeting with the Singpho Chief was followed by the introduction of the tea plant and seeds to him. This magnanimous gesture of the Singpho tribe was the beginning of the tea industry in Assam which to this day is one of the lifeline to the State's economy. Unfortunately soon after his meeting with the Singpho Chief Bruce died in 1824. His younger brother Charles Alexander Bruce collected the tea plant and seeds, which were sent for examination to Calcutta Botanical



Above: traditional paddy cultivation Below: Using modern scientific



Garden where although the genuity of the tea plant was a suspect at the initial stages proved later to be of a better species than the China tea.

Although tea was with the Singpho community for generations it did not gain recognition until the State of Assam came under British domination with the signing of the Treaty of Yadaboo. In the year 1833 the British lost its monopoly of the Chinese Tea trade they turned to initiate tea –planting and Captain F. Jenkins in Assam declared that Assam was suitable for tea cultivation. The indigenous tea plants collected and sent for testing by Lieutenant Charlton were also cleared. Thereafter with the help of Chinese methods of cultivation and manufacture and with the help of Chinese labour tea plantations were developed throughout the region.

Bruce had encouraged the Singpho people to engage in tea cultivation but just a few were successful in the tea industry mainly due to financial reasons and lack of business acumen. Amongst a few who took to successful tea plantation the name of Ningroola of Ningroo merits mention.

Ningroo nestled in the picturesque foothills of the Patkai range along the river Buri-Dihing attracted the attention of the British more so as Ningroo and its neighbourhood was ideally both climatically as well as location-wise suitable for the Tea plantations and the tea Industry. Direct communication with the Hukwang Valley was also possible from Ningroo.

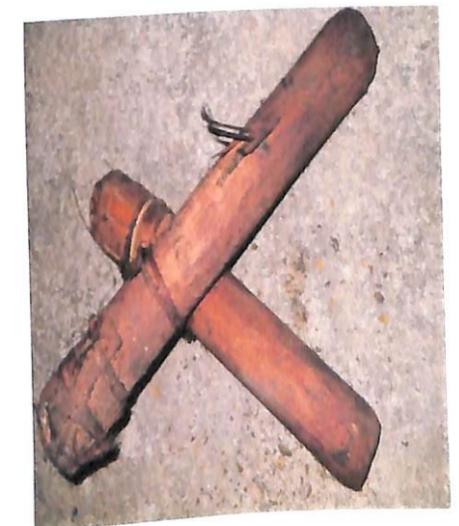
Ningroo itself got its name from the “Ningroola” family who had cleared the region to set up the village. Ningroo and its surroundings were covered with wild tea bushes, Ningroola was the third son of the family and he was attracted to the British’s lucrative Tea business and he was the first successful tea planter of the eastern border region of Assam. However it is a matter of remorse that the name of Ningroola does not feature prominently in the pages of the history of the tea industry. It is a known fact that of the first consignment of ninety five chests of tea that was sent to London for auction in 1840, thirty five chests were prepared by Ningroola. In the days when the Singpho community living in the remote borders of Assam had no business acumen, Ningroola made a profit of 480 pounds out of his tea business. This was a remarkable feat.

In recent times after the small tea growers or the ‘Green leaf growers’ were recognised by the tea industry, the Singphos took to planting the tea bushes in a more organised manner with the intention of making a livelihood by selling the green leaves. This form of growing

tea for the Singphos differs considerably from their traditional method of organically growing tea, collecting the tea leaves and preparing tea by indigenous methods.



Wild tea bush



Tea preserved inside the bamboo

Chapter VII

Opium in relation to the Singpho Community

Opium and its use is known to have a crippling effect on the human body. The Singpho community with its great history, rich culture, social coherence and its pride in belonging to the community and the influence and the use of opium amongst the members of the community is a dichotomy in itself. Till late 18th century the Singpho community did not know the use of Opium. It is believed that Opium found its way to the Singpho community only after the advent of the British in Assam.

The Singpho community is known for its pride and valour. The community did not accept the advent of the British regime in Assam and were resistant to their domination by them. The Singpho people were also spread over a large region covering the eastern boundary of India, Kachin in north Burma and Yunnan province of China. The British were very apprehensive of this warrior tribe and also about their relationship with their brethren across the borders of India. The Singphos believe they were introduced to Opium by the British mainly due to the fact that the British were fearful of the valiant, warrior and defiant tribe and later felt that opium intake could sober them out. It was from the middle of the 19th century that opium use was prevalent amongst the Singpho community. Towards the end of that century opium was consumed by almost every Singpho family at least in the British dominated Singpho regions.

The use of opium also spread to the Singpho communities residing in Kachin and China. The indulgence of the British in the use of opium is also seen in the fact that the chivalrous members of the Kachin levy that was formed by the British in Northern Kachin were rewarded by the offering of opium. Also when the American forces had stepped into Assam prior to World War II, opium was transported by them to the villages of Kachin.

While introducing Opium to the Singpho people the British were also aware of the ill effects of opium and the addiction problems that it could lead to. With intentions of keeping a check on the growing of opium and its use the British levied a tax on Opium cultivation in the Singpho regions

The people of Assam province were aware of the long lasting debilitating effect of opium on the individuals and the society of the Singpho community and hence the Valley Assamese people wanted the British to put a halt on the permission allotted to the Singpho community to grow opium. The British did not ban the growing of Opium but they put a restriction on the

sale of opium by setting up opium centres so that the opium addicted people could buy their quota of opium from such centres.

Although after they introduced the communities in the eastern boundary of the Assam Province to Opium the British tried to control their intake, the damage had already been done. The Singphos and the other smaller communities residing along with the Singphos in that region, such as the Tai-Phake, Tangsa and the Tai Khamti also developed addiction to opium. The attempt of the British to check the use of opium by levying tax on growing and selling of opium did not help the communities it only helped them to collect revenue for the exchequer.

Addiction to opium is a problem, which is faced by the Singpho community even today. Many believe that the fall in the population numbers of the Singpho people could be due to the use of opium. Such addiction adversely affects the financial, social, cultural fabric of the community and also destroys otherwise a healthy community. The use of opium is affecting the youth in present times and the Singpho society faces the challenge to eradicate such addiction, which has a debilitating consequence on it.

After India attained independence the use of opium was banned in the country. However for the eastern borderland inhabitants of India who have been addicted to opium for centuries a simple ban cannot keep them away from it. The use of opium is still prevalent. Such addiction is a drain on the finances of each family as well as on the society as a whole. This has also led to other problems such as unemployment within the community as also health related problems.

Conclusion

The Singpho community of India which resides today mainly in the Tinsukia and Sibsagar districts of Assam and in the Changlang and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh is one of the most culturally, historically and socially rich tribes of the north-eastern region of the country. As no documented material about the Community is available from ancient times the information on their migrational routes and their ancient history, culture, society, traditional customs and beliefs, religion, language and traditional knowledge can be derived mainly from the oral folklore, oral traditions and renditions as well as the cultural practices that have come down from generation to generation. However, from the beginning of the Ahom dynasty and with the documentations available in the Ahom Buranjis as also from the file notings and books written during the colonial regime, some written information and data of an earlier era on the Singpho community are now available.

The Singpho people are spread over a large region, within and outside the country, comprising the eastern part of Assam, Lohit and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, northern part of Myanmar and Yunan district of China. In Assam they are known as the Singphos, as Kachins in Myamaar, and Jingphaws in China. Although divided by geographical boundaries they maintain a line of communication sharing their cultural traditions, religion and language.

The Singpho people have rich and varied cultural, social and traditional traits which need to be documented for posterity. The Singphos of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, although traditionally believers of animism, embraced the teachings of Theravada Buddhism in 1882. Apart from the festivals related to Buddhism, the Singphos also observe their main cultural festival namely 'Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi' with great pomp and fervour. Their rich culture and traditions are manifested in their beautiful costumes, their weaves and crafts, their dance forms, their ballads and songs, their exquisite cuisine, their traditional rituals and indigenous knowledge. Linguistically the Singphos belong to the Tibeto Burman language group. The Singphos are divided into a number of clans, each under a chief known as a Gaam.

The Singphos are a brave and war-like tribe and since the advent of the British regime in Assam in 1826 with the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo, they had vehemently opposed being subservient to the colonial rulers. Although a section of the Singphos was compelled to unwillingly come under the colonial regime with the signing of the British- Singpho Treaty in 1826, many of the Singpho leaders did not sign the treaty but fought for their freedom. Many lost their lives, were banished or imprisoned for life. The British were apprehensive of the Singpho community who were a warrior tribe. The latter knew the art of making guns and gunpowder and were adept at guerrilla tactics. Also, the Singphos had their brethren across the borders in Kachin and in the Yunan Province, a fact which the British thought could be a threat to their regime. In an attempt to bring them under their ambit the British introduced the use of opium amongst the Singphos, issuing licenses for them to grow it on their land. The debilitating effect of opium use adversely affected the Singpho society and continues to do so till the present time.

The history of the British- Singpho relationship depicts both conflict and co-operation on the part of the Singpho community. In 1823 it was the Singpho Chief, Bisa Gaam who had presented a tea sapling and seeds to Robert Bruce. This magnanimous gesture of the Singpho tribe heralded the beginning of the tea industry in Assam, which to this day is one of the lifelines to the State's economy. 'Phalap', which is the Singpho name given to the tea that is prepared and brewed from the tea leaves plucked from the tea bushes that grow wild in the Singpho- inhabited land, is their traditional drink. Ironically, the Singpho people were displaced from their own land when the tea plantations came up under the colonial regime with the latter claiming all the land where the tea bush grew. Even after such unkind treatment was meted out to them the Singpho people participated in laying railway tracks for the colonial rulers for the tea, oil and coal industries. During World War II, the Singpho community willingly gave up their land for setting up of military bases and construction of helipads for War aircraft in the present Margherita subdivision of Tinsukia district. When General J.W. Stilwell was entrusted in 1942 with the task of building a road from Ledo through Kachin in Burma to Kunming in the Yunan Province of China prior to World War II this herculean job would not have been possible without the guidance, the knowledge and the painstaking efforts of the Singpho and other tribes such as the Lisus of Tai Ahom origin, the Khamtis and the Mishmis, inhabiting either side of the Patkai ranges. To embark on the construction project a brave Singpho individual, named Muru Gaam, was given the responsibility to draw up a survey report of the proposed road. Within a very short period of

time Muru Gaam completed the survey and chalked out the shortest route from the eastern border area of the Assam Province to Burma.

In olden times the boundaries of the Singpho dynasty in the Assam Province were believed to have been the Brahmaputra in the North, the Mishmi hills in the East, the Patkai ranges in the South and in the west it extended from the Nao-Dihing to the south banks of the Buri Dihing. However, with the advent of the British and the discovery of tea, oil and coal, which were mainly located in the Singpho- inhabited regions, the latter were gradually dislodged from their original abode. To set up tea plantations, for oil drilling and coal mining during the British regime, the Singphos had to sacrifice their land and environment. The change in the demography in the region of their habitation with the bringing in of the indentured labourers to work in the tea plantations, oil fields and coal mines also led to their displacement and affected them adversely. Such displacement, the change in demography, the loss of traditional land and environment and the addiction to opium later manifested themselves in serious consequences such as population decline and health hazards and threat to the socio-cultural fabric of their society. The community has been able to counter such challenges through the strong cohesive power of the society in which their culture, traditions, religion and language are the binding forces.

The Singpho community, one of the greatest tribes of north-east India with a rich culture, social traditions and beliefs, a remarkable history, traditional knowledge, oral traditions and folklore, merits detailed research and documentation. Their handlooms and weaves, crafts and jewellery and their knowledge of natural dyes have come down from generation to generation. Their elaborate and exotic cuisine with the use of organic vegetables and medicinal herbs and plants, their indigenous variety of rice steamed in scientific ways display their great knowledge of health and hygiene. Their knowledge of medicinal plants and their practice of herbal medicines is well known and their knowledge of making organic tea has received international acclaim.

The traditions, customs and beliefs, which identify the Singpho community, provide a strong foundation to their society. The folk songs and dances, the observance of traditional rituals at birth, marriage and death, their traditional architecture- 'the chang-ghor', their traditional crafts and jewellery, are all woven into the fabric of their culture. The different types of 'Manaus' or traditional dances portray the strong values and morals associated with their folk dances and their society.

Although known as a brave, valiant and war-like tribe, the Singpho people, after their conversion to Buddhism, gave up certain rituals such as the sacrifice of animals associated with their animist beliefs as also the tradition of offering of liquor and is now known to be one of the most sober and mature communities of the present age. Today, when there is a kind of social upheaval amongst various ethnic communities leading to assertion of their identities, the Singpho community stands out for the peaceful and mature way in which it has gone about in asserting their identity through their efforts at preserving their culture, social moorings, language, religion, traditional rituals, customs and beliefs and knowledge.

The goal of this ethnographic study and research on the Singpho community is to document and bring to light the remarkable features, viz. cultural, social, religious and spiritual, that identify it and are indeed struggling to thrive amidst monumental challenges. The effort to survive and thrive is being carried out solely through the initiatives aimed at preserving their indigenous traditions, beliefs, traditional knowledge, religion and language amidst the challenges of dwindling population numbers, the addiction to opium as well as keeping pace with the social churning and globalisation that is taking place outside their own immediate environment.

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