



Singphos in Assam: A socio-cultural study

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Introduction to Singphos:

The Singphos are one of the major ethnic tribe belonging to the Mongoloid group of the great human race. They have a rich cultural heritage with ethno - social background.

About the original homeland and migration of the Singphos, Colonel Hanney opined that the habitat of the tribe was on the great Eastern branch of the river Irrawadi. Sir Edwrd Gait traced that the original home of the Singphos is in the hilly country between the Chindwin river and the Patkai hills. The Singphos are known as " Kakhyn" in Burma.

According to jaiwa (popular traditional myth), Singphos are coming from the "Majoi Singra Bum", a naturally flat mountain located in Tibet. Due to increasing population they moved towards the Patkai hills and entered into Burma. Another myth said, the original homeland of the Singphos was Hukong valley towards the north Eastern part of the Patkai hills. After crossing the Patkai hill, the tribe entered into Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and settled down permanently.

At present, Singphos are living in different parts of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. In Assam, they are distributed in the districts of Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Karbi Anglong. In Tinsukia district, there are twenty Singpho dominated village in Margherita Sub- division. Among these the village " Ketetong" has been selected for sample survey.

OBJECTIVES:

Following are the main objectives of the study.

1. To find out the place of the Singpho tribe among others and to study about their socio- cultural life.
2. To find out their social transformation in the present context.
3. To find out the problems and prospects of their social life.

METHODOLGY:

The study observed certain methodology such as Library work, discussion with the villagers. Then literature, informations documents etc. are collected for the purpose from different secondary and tertiary sources. A household survey is done among the Singpho community of the village Ketetong..



HYPOTHESIS:

1. The Singpho society still thrives in the midst of transformation.
2. There is the slow breach of isolation and nucleation of tribal society in Assam.
3. The Singphos are facing special problems in spite of the general one.

INTRODUCTION OF THE SAMPLE VILLAGE.

The village Ketetong is situated in the Margherita sub-division of Tinsukia district, near the bank of the river Burhi Dehing. The village is bounded by Upper Dehing reserve forest on the north and Buri Dehing river on the east and west. On the west the village Inthong is situated. It is 8 km. away from Margherita town. A pucca road connected the village with Margherita town. It has one provincialised high school, two M. E. school and two L.P. school. The village has one public health centre, post office, a co-operative society and a weekly market.

Though the sample village is known as Singpho village, the population of the village is composed of various communities. Besides the Singphos, Assamese, Khamtis, Bodos, Nepalis are the other racial groups of the village.

The total population of the Singpho community of the sample village is 402. Out of the total population of 402, 194 are male and 208 are females. It is significant that in Ketetong village, the number of male is less than that of the number of female. The number of total household of Ketetong is 58. Out of the total household of the village there are 25 joint families and 33 nucleated family.

SOCIO- CULTURAL SCENARIO OF THE SINGPHOS

SOCIAL SYSTEM

During survey it is found that the Singpho society is a well organised society. Traditionally Singpho villages are under a chief. He is not only the head of the village but the entire territory is under his jurisdiction. But at present there is no chieftainship among them. Now the head of the Singpho society is "Aggi". All the responsibilities are vested on the "Aggi" and shalong, the body of village council.

FAMILY SYSTEM

Patriarchal system is prevailing in the Singpho society. Father is the head of the family. Traditionally the Singphos live in joint families. The sons have equal responsibility towards the family. All the sons have equal share of their family property. The female members had no right to family property, but she can use it freely. However, the widows have a share in the property left behind by her husband. But at present most of the joint families are splitting into nucleated family for economic independence.



CLANE

The Singphos divided into a numbers of clans. Each clan is under a chief. All these group are patrilineal. Each Singpho individual use their clan name as surname. There are 17 clans of the Singphos under the system of Chieftainship. The clans are named after their original places of migration. The Singpho clans are – I) Bisa ii) Deffa iii) Ningrang iv) Ningru v) Pisi vi) Kotha vii) Lutha viii) Wakhet ix) Kumsang x) Kunki, xi) Inthem xii) Dukhsa xiii) Guju xiv) Tangyang xv) wakhum xvi) Kiyang and xvii) Gudung .

A Singpho village consist of people belonging to several clans.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

The Sinphos are deeply religious. Traditionally they are animist. They believe in supernaturalism. They believe that they are surrounded by a large number of spirits, whom they call "Nats" which affect their welfare as well as misfortunes like disease and destruction. The Singphos perform various rituals to worship the 'Nats' (spirits) by offering traditional rice beer and sacrificing animal like pig.

Changing with time, the Singphos have changed their religious practices. Now they have given up traditional spirit worshipping. Today they are followers of " Buddhism". During the latter part of the 18th century a Buddhist monk from Hukong valley of Burma came across the Singpho people and baptized them to Buddhism. He built a Buddhist monastery at phakial village near Margherita. Following Buddhism, the religious life of the community has been deeply influenced by Buddhist ethics and morality. Now the Singphos worship Lord Buddha and observe various Buddhist rituals and ceremonies in their domestic and social life. The Singphos keeps Lord Buddha's statue in the east corner of the front varendah of their house and worship everyday with flower, scented sticks and lighted candle.

There is no doubt that spread of Buddhism has transformed once hostile Singpho people into a peace loving and liberal community.

FESTIVALS AND CEREMONY

At present the Singphos observe various festivals related to Buddhism as well as their old tradition. Some important festivals of the Singphos are as follows:

" Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi" is the traditional festival of the Singphos, celebrated each year on 14th February. It is "an attempt to rescue, to preserve and to extend the art and culture of the Singpho people" (Ningkhee R.2002). 'Shapawng Yawng ' is the forefather of the Singphos. 'Manau' means dance and ' Poi' means festival. " Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi" means dance festival to commemorate the forefather 'Shapawng Yawng ' in order to ensure all kinds of prosperity for their country and their community. The festival enhanced the mutual co-operation,



brotherhood and a sense of nationalism among the Singpho people inhabiting in different parts of the world.

An important Buddhist religious festival of the community is ' Sangken'. It is observed in the juncture of Chaitra and Baisaka. The occasion of the festival is the ceremonial bath of the Lord Buddha's statue.

'Chetidan' festival is celebrated in the month of April - May to seek bless.

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

PROBLEMS:

1. At present situation the major problem of Singpho society is the conflict between two groups — new generation and old generation. Today, due to the impact of modern education the young generation opposes the animistic tradition while the elder classes wish to continue this practice.
2. In spite of following Buddhism some still believe in spirit worshiping. Which create hinder in the path of their progress and development.
3. Though the literacy rate is satisfactory among the Singphos, we found some drop out students in school and college level, which indicates a draw back for advancement of literacy.
4. The number of Singpho family is shrinking day by day. It may be due to their unique marriage system.
5. At present the population of the Singphos is reducing because of retreating migration to Arunachal Pradesh. Their tribal economy is found less protective as they fell, in Assam.
6. Proper emphasis to their society is not given. Participation in different field with greater part of Assam is found rarely encouraged and motivated.

PEOSPECTS

Though the Singphos of Margherita region have been facing various problems from time to time, still there are some expectations to develop their living standard.

The Singphos of this region have enough resource. Unfortunately, they do not utilize it in a proper way. Major portion of land lay wasted. Moreover, they emphasis on the extensive production of rice and use the obsolete methods of production.

Singpho dressing sense is a asset. Singphos are smiled Weaver. Growing popularity of tribal dresses among the non-tribal can encourage in establishing weaving centers.

CONCLUSION

The study on socio-religious condition of the Singphos of Margherita sub- division of Tinsukia district, Assam, shows the results conducted to test the hypothesis given in the introduction part.

The first hypothesis the culture of "the singphos still thrives in transformation" has been proved through the analysis.



The second hypothesis "There is the slow breach of isolation and nucleation of tribal society in Assam" has been proved only partially through intrusion on non- tribal into their vilages.

The third hypothesis that" The Singphos are facing special problem inspite of the general one has been proved through the analysis of problems concerning historical and present.

It has been found that in spite of limitations it has brought certain significant points regarding the socio- religious condition of the Singphos. The study reveals how the modern science and technology can break the isolation of the people of remote areas and give a new dimension to the social and cultural aspects.

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