APPENDIX
APPENDIX I

Bio-cultural aspects of the Mān of Meghalaya

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ABSTRACT:

The descendants of the Shan settlers of Singimari are the present day Mān. After serving the Burmese cause in Assam, the then prevailing situation in the late 1820s left no other alternative for the dissentient Shans, under the leadership of Shem Shukhan, but to stay back seeking British protection. Continued conjugal relations with the Assamese females, at least for two initial generations, left certain impact on the formation and adoption of a new cultural set up for them. Present cultural custom and practices have undeniable reflection of the Assamese systems, though Buddhism has a specific role in remoulding the same. Notwithstanding the fact that the Mān also continued to acquire mates from neighbouring Bodo communities, there have been little or no influence of the Bodo cultures on them. Biological aspect presents a different picture. Though the genetic composition of the founder population remains unknown, the present composition of the Mān makes them distinct from the reported Burmese and Shan populations from the ancestral land of Buram; and on the contrary, bring them closer to the surrounding Bodo populations of West Garo Hills as reflected by distance statistics.

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In the course of compelling retreat of the Burmese invaders from Assam, a state of strong dissenasion cropped up among them on the issue of some privileges enjoyed by the older group, who stayed in Assam for a longer period since the days of first invasion. Reduction in the number of wives and servants of the said group by Mingimaha Nand Krodon, the then Burmese Governor of Assam, resulted in a battle and execution of the latter. This antagonistic act was an open rebellion against the state of Burma. Consequently, being afraid of apprehension Shan Phukon, the leader of the older group, refused to go back to Burma. However, David Scott came in their rescue by offering British protection and thereafter settling them at Singimari.

The older group of the Burmese, referred to as 'Purani Mān', served the Burmese interest in Assam for a longer period. During this prolonged stay they acquired Assamese females as mates by force or by intimidation. At Singimari again the Assamese refugees were their neighbours who continued to supply female conjugal partners to the Mān. This state of matrimonial link continued for the initial two generations since the days of invasion. Uncertainty on their returning to Burma and subsequent settling at Singimari provided the Mān with a ground to stabilize a suitable social and cultural atmosphere to live with as an organized group. The male member being constantly engaged in martial activities left the task of building and shaping the socio-cultural set up to female members. The initial female members of the society, being Assamese in origin introduced their socio-cultural system uncontested. The said system is reflected in most of the existing socio-cultural
practices of the Mān.

Though Census of India has described them as a Tai-speaking group, the dialectical similarity of the Mān with the people of lower Assam is striking. The Mān vocabulary has only a few residual Tai words, like 'Amā' — mother, 'Seloi' — cigarette, etc. The kinship system resembles that of the lower Assam except a few terms like that for mother. Modes of acquiring mates and prevalent marriage customs, minus religious rites cast a shadow of Assamese usage. The consanguineous marriages are not prescribed. Any such link is accepted on expiation etc. and is never given the status of marriage. Only 4 intentional cases could be recorded. Even though they formed a small population, and the matrilineal Garo form one of the immediate neighbours they could maintain the rigidity on consanguinity. This again is the influence of the Assamese culture. The fish forms an indispensable item of the dietary habit of the Mān, where again the Assamese influence is reflected. The Hindu practice of idol worship was in vogue until the revival of Buddhism among the Mān. They are Buddhist in every respect, still the worship of a few Hindu gods and goddesses, like Lord Krishna, Lakshmi Devi and Manasa Devi are quite in practice for specific reasons. Buddhism has certainly played a significant role in remoulding the society, since the people is involved in whole of the life cycle of the Mān. The celebration of the 'Bihu' festival bears the influence of the Assamese culture. The 'Rangali Bihu' called as 'Pani Bihu' involves Buddhist rites in a considerable proportion; but the 'Hagha Bihu' is celebrated as
done in Assam, concentrating mainly on preparation and consumption of varieties of cakes made out of rice, molasses etc.

The dead bodies are buried, in contrast to cremation practices in earlier days, observing much of Buddhist rites. Even though society sanctions cremation, its costly nature has ensured burying to be the general practice.

On settling at Singimari the Hān started acquiring female counterparts from the Bodo and allied populations of Goalpara and Garo Hills districts, in addition to that from the Assamese. The intensity of marrying local females increased along-with their shifting of habitation area to Garo hills. The acquiring of mates from the Bodo and allied populations — Garo, Hajong, Rabha and Koch was a positive step to maintain the rigidity on avoiding consanguineous marriages. Notwithstanding the fact that the females from the above mentioned societies contributed to the formation of the Hān population, there have been little or no influence of the former culture on the Hān.

To examine the genetic closeness of the Hān with the ancestral and recent parental populations data on a few genetic loci, ABO, Mi and Rh were utilized. The genetic composition of the founder population remains unknown. The contribution of the Assamese in the gene pool of initial generations cannot be denied. But the Assamese form a large heterogeneous population spread over whole of the Brahmaputra valley. Moreover, the Assamese are divided into several endogamous caste units. Therefore, the actual
subpopulation group(s) of Assamese that came in contact with the Shan soldiers, cannot be ascertained; hence the degree of genetic relationship of the Hm̄n with the Assamese could not be tested. Sanghvi's (1952) distance measure C reveals that the Shan are at a greater distance from the Hm̄n than are the Bodo and allied populations.

Thus it is disclosed that the Hm̄n have deviated from the ancestral stock, the Shan in their genetical composition and have come closer to the Bodo and allied population groups. But in the socio-cultural sphere influence of the Assamese society is striking.

Reference: