Introduction

Statement of the problem

India’s North East is a region of ethnic diversities inhabited by about 150 tribes. Time was when they live in splendid isolation from the outside world as closed systems, more or less independent from one another, and with a history of inter-village feuds and raids and reprisals among them. However, the coming of the British, Christianity and education in these areas opened up new vistas of the outside world for the tribes. In addition to these, experiments of democratic constitutionalism brought about in these areas under the provisions of the Constitution have made them by and by aware of the system of democratic governance in their villages which have remained hitherto under the rule of chiefs. The changes brought about by the changing time made impossible to continue with their early patterns of life. The old patterns had to adjust adapt and fuse itself to the new patterns of life brought about by the changing times. The results of this have been many – some desirable and some not so desirable. These changes have one way or the other also resulted in the erosion of the traditional ways of life to a great extent. Yet the past is not altogether death and while new ways of life have come to be accepted in most aspects of socio-political lives of the people, there are also certain areas in where one can see remnants of the past still having a considerable sway over the people. The present work entitled “Socio-Cultural and Political Changes Among the Tribes of Manipur: A Case Study of the Poumai Naga Tribe” is an exercise in understanding the traditional socio political life of the tribe along with the socio-political changes brought to it by the changing times and the impacts it had on the socio political life of the people, and is being carried out as a case study by taking up the Poumai, one of the thirty three recognized Scheduled Tribes in Manipur.
Objectives of the research work:

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To explore the historical background such as origin, migration and settlement of the Poumais;
2. To take up a comprehensive study of their socio-cultural life, traditional administrative system, customary laws, beliefs and practices and evaluate them in the context of contemporary life and practices;
3. To explore and highlight the lost and forgotten tradition and culture of the Poumais in the wake of modern forces; and
4. To examine the factors that are responsible for the social and political changes that have taken place among the Poumai Nagas.

Besides these main objectives, the present work has also been taken up as an exploration of the traditional socio-cultural and political life of the Poumais so that it may not be lost altogether from the sight of the new generations which have seemingly started losing sight of their past roots and moorings as a result of the changes brought about by numerous factors like that of Christianity, education, contact with outside world, democratic experiments, etc. It is fervently hoped that such a study will help them better understand and appreciate their past as well as understand their present against a proper historical backdrop of their past.

Review of literature:

Until very recently the Poumais were clubbed together with the Maos and were being identified as “Mao Naga”. It is only after the Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes Order (Amendment) Act, 2002 was passed by the Parliament of India that the Poumais have come to be recognized as a bona-fide tribe of Manipur. As a result, to the best of my knowledge, no in-depth research work on the tribe since it has come to its own has been taken up by any scholar.
Till today, no book on the tribe is known being published by any scholar or writer. Prior to recognition of the tribe, the account of the Poumai were found very rarely mentioned in the existing books and Government records. However, some booklets, souvenirs, occasional magazines, seminar papers, etc. are found. Mention can be made of The 2nd Leo-Day Celebration, February, 20-23, 2008; A History of the Oinam Hill Baptist Church, Silver Jubilee, 2000, A.D.; Souvenir, Poumai Naotoumai Me, Third General Conference, Publication, 2001; Poumai Thonii Celebration, publication, 2002; Souvenir (A History of Christianity in Phuba), The Phuba Thapham Baptist Church Golden Jubilee, 1994; Souvenir, Poumai Naga Baptist Association, Silver Jubilee Publication, (1978-2003); Tungjoy Baptist Church Goden Jubilee, 1997; Indigenous Games, (Toukhaoyu and Kakayu) Naga Traditional Games; A Brief History of Christianity to Zhubumai village, A Golden Jubilee publication, 1994; “The Poumai Nagas”, an unpublished manuscript by (Late) R. S. Dowang; “Folk Tales of Poumai Naga” a booklet by (Late) Raini Tho Pao; etc. At best, these writings give some brief and sketchy accounts of different aspects of the socio-cultural life of the Poumai people. There is one M. Phil. dissertation which has been written in the History Department of Manipur University titled “Poumai Naga Tribe of Manipur: A Socio-Cultural Study”. It studies the socio-cultural life of the people from a historical perspective. There are two other small dissertations submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements of Bachelor of Divinity Degree titled “Influence of the Traditional Rites and Rituals of the Poumai Nagas on Christianity in Manipur” and “A Brief Historical Account of Christianity in the Poumai Naga Community”. Yet, none of them have made a comprehensive study of the socio-political and cultural life of the people and the changes taking inside their society. Therefore, it is being humbly hoped that the present research work will help in filling up a void concerning studies relating to the Poumai Naga tribe.
Research questions/hypothesis:

The present work did not start with any specific hypothesis. Instead it was started with a view to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the traditional socio-cultural practices of the people?
2. What were the important aspects of their traditional religious belief and practice system?
3. How the traditional villages of the Pouflais were administered by the chief and his council of elders?
4. What were the main factors that brought changes in the socio-political life of the people?
5. What are changes that have been brought about by the factors, and how they have affected the individual and social life of the Pouflais?
6. What has been the extent of political development which has taken place within the Pouflais society?

Methodology:

The methodology used in the research is exploratory, historical and analytical in design since so far no in-depth study has been undertaken by any scholar or writer on this tribe. The study is mainly based on primary sources generated in course of the field work conducted during the course of the research work and covering about forty villages. The list of the Pouflais villages visited during the course of the research work is being given in a separate index. Information pertaining to the subject matter of the research was collected during the course of field work with the help of individual as well as group interviews, exploration of oral traditions, old documents, etc. Besides, observation technique, both participant and non-participant, has also been
adopted while studying the socio-religious and cultural life of the people. In addition to these, extensive use of available secondary sources has also been made with view to gain more information as well as to gain more insights to the study of the subject matter of the present research.

Chapterization of the thesis:

The present work is being divided into seven chapters. The first chapter briefly describes the general topography of the Poumai inhabited areas, its climatic conditions, flora and fauna, etc. More importantly, this chapter discusses about the origin, migration and settlement of the Poumains, their village settlement, their recognition as a tribe, their language, etc.

The second chapter is an attempt to explore the socio-cultural and economic life of the Poumai Nagas prior to advent of Christianity. The chapter begins with the Poumai social structure and community life, and the position of women in the Poumai society. It also discusses some of the main traditional economic activities of the people such as agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, pottery, handloom industry, manufacturing of Poutai, cane and bamboo works, black-smithy, etc. Further, it also deals with the food and drinks, dresses and ornaments, traditional house, musical instruments, songs and dances, games and sports, feasts and festivals, marriage, war and head hunting practice, etc. of the Poumains.

The third chapter studies the traditional religious belief and practices of the Poumains. The concept of God and spirits, the mode of their worship, their place in the socio-cultural life of the people, etc. are discussed in the first part of the chapter. The traditional religious functionaries in the Poumai society like that of the village Vhe (Chief), the Napao (Priest), Ngumai (Shaman), Pousoumai (Diviner) are also being discussed along with the functions they perform inside the society. The chapter also examines the rite-de-passage and other rites and rituals practiced by the people in times of establishing a new
village, construction of the village Chief's house, agricultural rites, tires and rituals performed on other special occasions, etc. Besides, gennas, taboos, sin, punishment, etc. associated with the socio-cultural life of the people is also being dealt with in this chapter.

The fourth chapter of the thesis is a study about the various aspects of the traditional administrative system of the Poumais. The village administrative functionaries like the *Vhe* (Chief) and the village *Chiime* (Elders' Council), and their power, functions and privileges are discussed in this chapter. It also studies the customary laws and practices of the Poumais, mainly the laws relating to land holding and controlling, inheritance, divorce, customs relating to adultery, theft, homicide, war and peace and other important ordeals. It also describes the traditional dormitory system and highlights the calendar of the people.

The fifth chapter is about the growing of political consciousness among the Poumais, their coming into contact with the democratization process, the subsequent administrative changes in the hill areas, etc. It explicates the concept and meaning of political development, administrative and political development during British period, administrative and political changes after the independence of India due to the introduction of various Acts, such as, Manipur Hill People's (Administration) Regulation Act, 1947, Manipur (Village Authority in Hill Areas) Act 1956, Manipur Hills Areas (Acquisition of Chief Rights) Act, 1967 and Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971. This chapter also examines the participation of the Poumais in the electoral politics of the state. It also highlights the emergence of socio-political organizations among the Poumais at various levels.

The sixth chapter analyzes the changes that have taken place in the socio-cultural life and religious beliefs and practices of the people. Some of the main factors that are responsible for the changes such as advent of Christianity,
introduction of modern education and development programs introduced by the governments are discussed herewith. The changes being analyzed here are those related with their religious life, discipline and moral, language, feast and festivals, marriage, death and disposal, dormitory system, practice of head hunting, economy, health and hygiene, etc.

The seventh chapter is the concluding one which systematically summarizes the findings of the previous chapters. It winds up highlighting the importance of traditional values as well as change and development in the line of the contemporary life and practices with suggestions for better adjustment of the two.