CHAPTER VII

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The North East India is known for its rich and diverse cultures and traditions which appeal outsiders especially researchers of different disciplines to visit the region. Among all the eight sister states of North East India; Arunachal Pradesh is the largest and shares a long international border with the country like Bhutan, China and Myanmar. The state is bounded by China in the north, Myanmar in the east, Bhutan in the west while Assam and Nagaland bounded it on the south. As such, because of its domestic and international boundary Arunachal Pradesh occupies an important and strategic position in India. The erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh on January 20, 1972 and the then Prime Minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi declared it as Union Territory under Indian Union. After fifteen years of the Union Territory status on February 20, 1987 Arunachal Pradesh got a full-fledged statehood and became the 24th States of the Indian Union.

At present day, the state is administered through twenty (20) districts which are named after the major rivers of the state. Due to vast territory and geographical location, the delimitation of administrative circles and creation of a new district is a continuing process. Because of its rich and unexploited natural resources, the state emerged as sensitive border state for the Government of India. Besides its strategic and geo-political importance the state is the home of 26 major tribes and number of sub-tribes. These tribes are maintaining their own distinct culture, customs, traditions and
institutions to preserve their age-old practices even in the present day. As such, due to distinct cultural identities and language variations among these tribes the state is endowed with affluent cultural mosaic and indigenous institutions. These multi-cultures, multi-languages and multi-ethnic presences in the state offers a midi system of scope for scholars and researchers to carry out a research studies on various aspects of these tribes especially in social sciences. Besides the rich cultural heritage and traditions, the state is known for abundant in flora and fauna which draws attention from other disciplines to explore this state for research activities. From the social and cultural perspectives, Arunachal Pradesh is divided into three prominent cultural zones viz., the western cultural zone, the central cultural zone and the eastern cultural zone. The Mahayana Sect of Buddhism populated the western zone which is inhabited by the followers of the Mahayana Buddhism like the Monpa, the Mamba, the Khamba, the Sherdukpen, the Aka and the Miji.

The central cultural zone is peopled largely by the followers of an indigenous religion which are variously known as the Nyedar Namlo, the Meder Melo, the Kargu Gangi and the Yelam Kaban comes under the umbrella of the Donyi Polo religion. The Apatani, the Adi, the Galo, the Tagin and the Nyishi are the tribes live in the central zone and follow the above religions in their dominated districts of the state. The eastern zone is dominated by the Theravada Sect of Buddhism which is followed by the tribes like the Khampti, the Singpho and the Tikak Tansa. Nowadays the Singpho people follow the Theravada Sect of Buddhism and the Buddhist way of living has
been overshadowed the Singpho indigenous religion called the *Nhatgun* which stands for worshipping of spirit. The word ‘*nhatgun*’ is composed of two words ‘*nhat*’ and ‘*gun*’ which means ‘spirit’ and ‘protector’ and denotes the worshipping of spirit of the protector. In the past when the people followed *Nhatgun* belief system, they performed numbers of rituals by sacrificing all kind of livestock like fowl, pig, ox, goat, buffalo and elephant. The rituals were related to their day-to-day activities, which was performed through traditional priest *dumsa* who used to chant hymns to invoke the benevolent spirits. Some of the rituals were performed from time to time in order to propitiate the malevolent spirit who is considered as cause of all miseries and misfortune in their lives. The sole purposes of these rituals were to maintain peace and prosperity in the society although it appeared to be an expensive and elaborate to arrange such ritual in the village.

Apart from these rituals, the people used to celebrate a numbers of festivals to express their external manifestations of rich cultural and traditional practices. Nonetheless, there are seemingly appeared to be changed in the tribe’s outlook after the adoption of the Buddhist way of life. It is observed that some of these rituals and rites have been considerably diminished into oblivion these days in the villages. The expensive sacrificial rituals in order to appease the spirits hampered the economic life of the people due to which the people adopt the Buddhism later on.\(^{582}\) Due to influence of the Buddhist doctrines, it would seem that they discontinued sacrificing big animals like cow, buffalo and elephant in the ritual altars.

\(^{582}\) NBRVMI, *op.cit.*
However, in place of big animals they still sacrifice small animals like fowl, pig, and goat during rituals and traditional events. So, it is found that although people adopted the Buddhism they did not give up their traditional belief system totally rather some of the important rituals are still perform by the tribe in the areas. In fact the people did not follow all traditional ritual and activities in entirety nowadays but somehow they continue to conduct marriage ceremony in traditional way as endeavour to preserve the culture. It is maintained that in the early 19th century the Singpho traditional festivals and rituals had been acculturated into the Buddhist festivals by discarding the original forms. Consequently, people began to celebrate the Buddhist festivals like the Sangken, the Buddha Jayanti and the Varshavash in place of their traditional festivals. With the passage of time, especially after the launching of indigenous religious consciousness movement in the state the tribe realized that they should revive their age-old culture and tradition though they converted into the Buddhism.

It is told that after a protracted deliberations and soul searching debates among members of the community, it was resolved to revive one of the important and socially significant old festivals the Shapawung Yawng Manau Poi. Accordingly, since 1985, this festival is celebrated in the month of February annually by the tribe. In this festival the monastic authority also take part by visiting the celebration ground to offer blessing to the gathering devotees although they do not involve in the celebration like other members of the community. It is seen that these days the festival is celebrated in a
modified manner in order to suit with the Buddhist tenets and way of life. Traditionally animal was sacrificed in the celebration ground of the festival but these days animal sacrifice is not allowed. However, a cooked meat is allowed to bring to the ground and serve limited amount of drink so that they could peacefully celebrate the festival. The Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi festival is known for dance and is celebrated in the name of the Singpho ancestor, Yawng where the delegates from across the border participate in the festival. As such, this festival is considered as medium to inculcate a sense of belongingness among the Singpho who are residing in different parts of the globe. Among the twenty 26 tribes the Singpho are largely inhabited in the Changlang and Lohit District of the state. They occupied the plain foothill areas of northern part of the Changlang District under Miao and Bordumsa Sub-Division along the rivers Buri Dihing and Tengapani. While in Lohit District they largely settled on the banks of river Tengapani at Namsai and Chowkham Administrative Circle.

Besides Arunachal Pradesh they are also settled in the districts of Tinsukia, Sibsagar and Karbi Anglong of Assam. Other than India the Singpho are found in Myanmar, China and Thailand and they shared a closed affinity in many social and cultural practices. In India, the major concentration of the population is observed at Bordumsa Administrative Sub-Division of Changlang District. It is found that during the migration from one places to another localities they might had parted from one batch to another batch at different geographical locations. Despite of these barriers they are bounded together by a common and distinct cultural homogeneity
in the state. This cultural bonding among the community could be observed during the celebration of the *Shawpawng Yaung Manaou Poi* festival in which the Singpho delegates from particularly Myanmar, China, Thailand, Japan and other countries partakes in the celebration to showcase their unity and solidarity. The Singpho homestead is bounded by Indo-Myanmar international boundary in the east, and Dibrugarh District of Assam in the west. Since early days, the Pangsaau Pass of Patkai Range was used by the tribe to transact their commercial and cultural relations with Myanmar. So, the Singpho used the passes especially the Pangsaau Pass for their migration and continue to use the passes to maintained connection with the Singpho of Myanmar and East Asia. These days government imposed a restrictions on free movement at Indo-Myanmar border on the ground of security and administrative reasons. It is maintained that the Singpho began to migrate from Myanmar to the Brahmaputra Valley since early days.

It was in the later part of the 18th century the tribe came to limelight in Assam during the *Moamaria* rebellion. In 1805 the Singpho Chief Bisa Nong made an appeal to the Myanmarese king Bodawpaya for his military assistance on behalf of the Matach Chief Bharat Singha. The Myanmarese ruler accepted the appeal thus consequently the Myanmarese got involved in the internal political affairs of Assam as an ally of the *Moamaria*. On the other hand, the Ahom ruler Gaurinath Singha appealed the British for their assistance to quell the rebels which the later accepted thus, the British also got involved in the internal political matters of Assam. As such, the internal political clash between the *Moamaria* rebels and the Ahom monarch
transformed into Anglo-Myanmarese political clash and resulted in the large scale Anglo-Myanmarese war in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Singpho Chief Bisa Nong was instrumental in bringing the Myanmarese power in the soil of Assam, which strengthened the revolts and compelled the Ahom king to seek help from the British. During the course of the Moamaria rebellions, both the Ahom and the British realized the political and strategic importance of the Singpho people and their territories. The British administration was planning to extend their commercial activities to the East Asian countries particularly towards Myanmar and routes leading to these countries runs through the Singpho homesteads. After annexation of Assam, the British realized the trade and commercial importance of the Singpho territory owing to which the British had to maintain friendly relations with the Singpho. Besides the trade and commerce significance, the territory occupied a strategic location between Assam and Myanmar. As such, the British had considered this territory as buffer zone between their possession in Assam and Myanmar.

Apart from geopolitical consideration, it is found that the Singpho speaks the language of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family. Unlike other tribes of the state, the tribe speaks the same language without much variation and shares the same culture and tradition irrespective of their different places of settlements. Racially, the Singpho belonged to the Mongoloid origin and having all the common physical features of the Mongoloid human race. Besides, the physical features, language and their homestead it is important to understand the tribe traditions about their
myths and legends. As the tribe was a pre-literate so they lacked written records, due to which their oral traditions is the only source to know about their origin and migration. There are numbers of traditions current among the people to explain their origin and migration. It is observed that a popularly accepted traditions current among the people is that they migrated from present day Kachin Province of the upper Myanmar. According to a myth it is believed that the Singpho people were created in a plateau called Majai Singra Bum which is believed to be situated somewhere in present day Tibet(China).\footnote{583} The word ‘Bum’ means ‘mountain’ and the word ‘Majai Singra Bum’ means a ‘flat mountain stand’ in Tibet (China). The traditions further maintained that from this mountain the Singpho began their migration and reached Hukang Valley in Myanmar from where they again migrated to different places like India and Thailand. There is a every likelihood that the eastern parts of India proper were penetrated by prehistoric people from Yunnan and Burma.\footnote{584} After staying here for a long period they began to migrate towards different directions batches after batches.

There is another traditions which maintained that the Myanmarese was obstructing those Singpho who were migrating towards south direction from Hukang Valley. Consequently, a fierce battle was said to have fought between the Singpho and the Myanmarese and as such, being obstructed by the Myanmarese in their southward migration the tribe was compelled to

\footnote{583}{KGSI, op.cit.}
\footnote{584}{D.D.Kosambi, The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline, Vikas publishing House PVT. LTD., 1964 (2nd Rep.2005), P.34.}
turn to the south east direction and reached the Patkai Range. The date of
their migration is given approximately as the end of eighteenth century.\footnote{\textcite{Dutta}} Through the passes of Patkai Range especially the Pangsa Pass the Singpho
continued their migration and entered into the Brahmaputra Valley. In the
course of time, the Singpho began to occupy a large area of the Upper
Assam region. Still these days they are found in Upper Assam region
although the major concentrations of the population are found in Arunachal
Pradesh. Regarding origin of the nomenclature ‘Singpho’ several works
have attempted to explain the meaning of word ‘Singpho’ but none of these
works have attempted in-depth to explain a convincing meaning of the term
so far. It is observed that a number of researchers have given different
interpretations about the origin of nomenclature of the term ‘Singpho’.
Nevertheless, besides the interpretation given by various researchers the
tribe has their own interpretation about the origin and meaning of the term
‘Singpho’. It is maintained that original term of the word ‘Singpho’ was
‘jingpho’ which stands for those human beings who are exposed to ‘Outer
World’.

After settling in the present homesteads the tribe began to interact
with other community and some of the neighbouring tribes could not
pronounce the word ‘jingpho’ rather they pronounced it as ‘Singpho’. It
would be worthwhile to mention D.D.Kosambi’s words when he rightly
puts it as; “when two cultures are in contact the stronger form of production

\footnote{P.C.Dutta, \textit{op.cit.}, p.3.}
often imposes its language upon the other.”\textsuperscript{586} After establishing their settlements in the present homesteads the tribe did not settled down in agricultural practices directly so they lacked a regular and surplus production. They were engaged in hunting and gathering economy, thus the people had to depend on their neighbouring tribes for supporting their economy. Apart from this, due to prolonged stay with these neighbouring tribes the word ‘Singpho’ gradually replaced the original word ‘Jingpho’. Moreover, the Constitution of India has recognised and recorded the tribe nomenclature as ‘Singpho’ in place of the word ‘Jingpho’. Therefore, the Jingpho tribe was began to be known as the Singpho in India but in other countries, they are known by the original nomenclature with some degree of variation. For instance in Thailand, they are known as the Jinphaw while in countries like Myanmar, Laos, Malaysia and other East Asian countries they are known as the Kachin. In places like mainland China, Hongkong, Taiwan and Singapore the tribe is known as the Jingpo. During the field study it is found that most of the informants accepted the existing literary sources explaining that the meaning of the Singpho as human being. It is noted that irrespective of slight variation in the word it stands for English word ‘man’ or ‘human being’.

We may infer from the above discussions that the tribe could preserve their indigenous traditional institutions, practices and culture in the form of oral traditions till these days. In the Singpho society, intana mitaw (family) is considered as unit of political institution and social life under the larger

\textsuperscript{586} D.D.Kosambi, \textit{op.cit.}, P.43.
social organisation of the society. They maintained a patriarchal system of family order which is based on marriage and the father is the head of the family who generally have a final say on any matter related to family. Since the tribe follows a patriarchal system of family, the institution of marriage is considered with highest order of sanctity and sacrament in the society. They do not accept any pre-marital and live-in-relation system of family in the society. Even nowadays, no couple is allowed to live together in the society without performing a proper marriage ritual and rites. They maintained the clan exogamy and the tribe endogamy although these days some flexibility is being observed in the marriage. Otherwise, the tribe strictly practiced the clan endogamy as they considered their fellow clan members as member of the same family from genealogical point of view. The Singpho term for clan is ‘fan’ which means ‘people belong to the same blood’ thus the term ‘fan’ itself expressed the intensity of clan endogamy among the Singpho. As a social practice, fellow clan members were/are prohibited to marry and any sexual relationship between them was/is regarded as incest in the society.

Generally, the Singpho practised monogamy but polygamy was also accepted in the society, as there was no hard and fast rule for a Singpho man to marry only one woman. In such practice, it would appeared that only the chiefs used to marry more than one woman however with the passage of time the other Singpho men also began to have more than one wife.

Nowadays the tribe considered monogamy and polygamy marriage as an individual choice and it depends upon the respective man whether to marry more than one wife or not. Generally speaking the cases of polygamy
were/are due to social obligation on the part of a man to shoulder the responsibility to look after his deceased brother's widow. Since from the past, the Singpho followed an established customary practices of marrying their maternal uncle's daughter before they look for other bride elsewhere. Due to influence of modernity there are changes in the rigidity of these practices and many do not oppose an inter-trIBE marriage these days in the society. Besides the influence of contemporary modern outlook, embracing of the Buddhism has affected a considerable degree of changes in the socio-cultural life of the community. As a result, traditional marriage institution also got modified in the Buddhist way of practice and people used to invite the monastery monks for their blessing to newly wedded couple. Nevertheless, some degree of traditional practices is still observed during the marriage ceremony and rituals. The traditional practices of giving bride wealth (phy), observation of proper rituals and sacrifice of animal are still performed in the marriage ceremony. Traditionally, phy was paid with original stuffs like gong, kaichi (beads), Myanmarese gun, puchung (traditional cloth) buffalo, cow, elephant and other valuable items. Due to non-availability of original items these days phy is given in cash instead of kind but the other items like cow, buffalo, elephant and puchung are still paid in kind.

Nowadays, people did not follow any specific and rigid rule in giving phy rather it became a family issue to presents gifts to the bride's family in reciprocal manner. In the context of conventional notion of paying of bride wealth the Singpho are seems to be more liberal and modern in outlook. The
people are seem to be liberal in matters related with expenditure and rigidity in marriage ceremony thus they favour positive changes in conducting a marriage ceremony. The girl’s family also spend virtually the same amount the boy’s family spend in giving phy to the girl’s family. In the past rather there was a traditional perception that the boy’s family only spend a huge amount in giving the items demanded from the girl’s family so whatever boy gave to the girl’s family was considered as the bride wealth. As, these days due to influence of modernity the tribe inculcated modern argumentative opinion on the issue of ‘bride wealth’. It is seen that the people are of the opinion that one should not ignore the expenditure made by the girl’s family in solemnising marriage ceremony. In this aspects, one of the informants asserted:

Sometime it happens that a girl could take with her very precious movable family properties which could be costlier than the cost of phy given by the boy’s family to the girl’s family. Therefore, the expenditure made by the girl’s family in a marriage ceremony should not be ignored.587

Apart from this social attitude, the people believed that the conventional term ‘bride price’ presumably suggests as if the boy is purchasing the girl instead of marrying her. Thereby it would seem that the Singpho people prefer the use of term ‘bride wealth’ instead of the archaic term ‘bride price’ in the society. To substantiate the present argument it would be worthwhile to mention here W.H.Lowie who puts it as, “We ought not to speak of a bride-price at all, but merely of a conveyance of “bride-wealth”.588 It is observed that the rigidity of giving of phy and other expenditure made in a

587 SGSI, op.cit.
588 Rober H. Lowie, quoted in Tana Showren, op.cit., p.84.
marriage ceremony is not in existence anymore. Rather a system of exchanging of gifts between the two families is in vogue these days. In the context of social stratification among the Singpho it is to be noted that there is no written records available however, people considered that their society was divided into three social groups. The first social group is consisting of chief's family whom the tribe called Dhufan; while the Shanga as the commoners and the Mayam the domestic help in the society.

It is seen nowadays the people are not giving emphasis on dividing society into different groups rather the people believed that all are equal as a citizen before the Constitution of India. Besides the social division, the people are vehemently against the institution of slavery and questioned the earlier interpretation of the term Dowaniya who were considered as offsprings of the Singpho and their Assamese captives whom they captured during the early part of 19th century by plundering the plains of Assam. The fact of the matter is that interpretation given on the nomenclature Dowaniya as miscegenation or people of mixed race is misnomer and incorrect interpretation as asserted by the tribe. Therefore, the Singpho rejected such explanation and considered the earlier researchers' interpretation as derogatory and incorrect.

Now, the tribe firmly believed that the nomenclature Dowaniya has been misinterpreted thus they wanted researchers to handle the term with utmost cautious and avoid the wrong interpretation. Obviously, it is a sensitive and debatable issue among the people and hence, in the present study an attempt has been made to analyse with utmost caution so that a
proper interpretation of the nomenclature Dowaniya could be presented in the research work. During the field study, it is found that most of the informants of the tribe do not accept the term Dowaniya as interpreted by earlier researchers and firmly asserted the community do not subscribe to such misnomer word applied against them. As the tribe has different explanation of their own about the term which do not have any connection with the earlier explanation of the Dowaniya as an offsprings of the Singpho and the Assamese slave women. But the people believed that the term was an Assamese word which was either mean to address those people who could speak two languages or those people who were once again taken back after being parted from their own people.\textsuperscript{589} Some of the tribesman maintained that the concept of Dowaniya was started by the Ahom most probably during the Moamaria rebellion in order to disunite the Singpho by creating a kind of social differences. As after the tribe join the Moamaria against the Ahom monarch they proved to be a strong political ally to the rebels. Thus, besides the interpretation of the term by earlier researchers the people themselves have various interpretations of the word Dowaniya however, they could not offer a specific and convincing explanation on the term so far. Under given these arguments, it would be prudent that there should be further research and thorough investigation on the historicity of the word in order to establish a trustworthy fact to enable the tribe understand the correct nomenclature of the word Dowaniya in the society.

\textsuperscript{589} Information collected from IGSI, KGSI, SGSI, NBRVMI, RSI, NCI, SNSI et.al during the fieldwork.
After observing the social sensitivity and complexity of the term *Dowaniya* it is found that the tribe is highly concern about misinterpretation of the term so they still keen to engage on critical discussions on the issue in future among the members of the community. In the present study the researcher used the existing available literature on the term *Dowaniya* only for the purpose of footnotes and tried to understand and interpret the term from tribe’s point of views. In the recent past there is changed of social outlook on the derogatory interpretation of the term *Dowaniya* among the people in the society. Earlier in the village the tribe used to live in a joint family however with the passage of time the choice of family system changed and these days they prefer to live in a nuclear family particularly in the towns. As the tribe practiced patriarchal system of family so in both the joint and nuclear family, eldest male member occupied the supreme position in the house who gives the final decision on any family matters. Likewise the eldest female member of the family was the charge of household chores like cooking, feeding the livestock and guiding younger female members of the family. Being patrilineal society sons have the customary right to inherit their parental properties. The daughters have no customary right over their father’s properties but they have the right to inherit movable properties and could also use immovable properties until any male member raise objection. According to customary laws of property inheritance, all the sons get equal share of parental property however one who stayed with the parents get the larger share as they are to shoulder the responsibility of looking after the parents.
During process of family separation and division of property among the sons, the village council and other elder members of the village are invited to settle the issue. Generally, a property division is done according to traditional rules of succession thus the processes are settled amicably among the members of the family. In the matter of property inheritance, it is found that nowadays the people considered it as a family affair so it is up to the respective family whether to let their sons or daughters inherit the parental properties. In spite of numbers of changes occurred in the social life the kinship and clan system are the foundation of the Singpho society and their social structure. These days the young generation are not incline to understand the social and traditional practices of the community. Nevertheless, the elder generation are trying hard to teach them the traditional socio-cultural practices and institutions. Along with socio-cultural changes, a number of changes are observed in the material life from an individual lifestyle to construction of house in the society. Traditionally, the Singpho used to construct their houses with materials available in the nearby forest like thatch leaf, bamboo, wood and cane. Nowadays it is not the same situation, the people rather prefer to construct RCC houses in both towns and villages. Earlier they used to construct their granaries at a particular area far away from village however, these days they construct their granaries in their own land near by their houses. This change could be attributed due to increasing case of fire accident and robbery in the society.

It appears from the foregoing discussions that the Singpho society experienced a fast changing life style in term of worldview, socio-cultural
and traditional practices. These changes could be attributed to factors like modernity, education, mass media, administration and means of communication and transport facilities in the society. Besides the socio-cultural life, the people also witnessed a change in the field of economy and commercial activities. In the early days the tribe depended largely on subsistence agriculture with rudimentary tools and technology which was supplemented by hunting and fishing for their livelihood. During colonial period, tea economy was booming contagious to the Singpho territories but they did not take any interest in tea business, rather they were inclined to their subsistence agriculture and traditional economy. But, nowadays the Singpho are also engaged in tea estate business in different capacity within their territory and nearby areas of Assam. Other than tea business, the community is taking a lot of interest in other business and many of them are running their own private business like restaurant entrepreneurship, furniture shop while some are running school. Although the community is keeping at pace with modern world in term of socio-economic sphere but they are still maintaining their own traditions and cultures by wearing their traditional attires and outfits especially at their inhabited areas. Men-folk traditional dress is called baka (lungi) while women-folk traditional dress is called bukang (wrap skirt). These days also the Singpho women used to wrap a traditional waistband called ningwat to show their marital status and unmarried girls are not permitted to wear this dress. Their traditional bag called npeng is very popular and commonly used by the people, which are largely woven locally by womenfolk.
Besides their traditional attires, the people are concerned about preservation of their traditional recipes. Attempt to preserve the traditional cuisine could be observed in a restaurant located at Bordumsa township in which all type of the traditional Singpho food items are available. Rice is the staple food of the people which is consumed along with leafy vegetables and meat invariably. Among numbers of delicacies *chapup* (*laopani*), fish soup (*passa*) and *pungkung saat* (steamed rice) is very popular among the tribe. Due to availability of manufactured liquor in the local market *chapup* is losing its importance day by day while *passa* is hardly seen in the society. As such, due to lack of *passa* nowadays people prefer to consume chicken and other manufactured soup which is available in the markets. Apart from the traditional recipe the Singpho are still fond of traditional games and sports which were played in the olden days by their ancestors. Since early days, the tribe was known for their athletic physique as they were always engaged in physical activities like hunting, playing for entertainment and doing other menial works. Because of modern way of entertainment like music system, radio, television, mobile and computer they could not continue their physical activities which have relegated their traditional games and sports along with their physical fitness. As the young generation are inclined towards the modern gadgets, which made them more individualistic and self-centered in the society. The elder generations along with the non-governmental organisations are trying hard to revive and inculcate interest among the younger generations towards the traditional games and sports. In order to encourage these sports, the community along with local
administration used to organise games and sports programme during the Independence Day, Republic Day and other social events.

With the passage of time these traditional games and sports are facing fast disappearing from the society although a few traditional games like smen (traditional chess), gunrang logong (traditional dice), chimen (marble) are being played during social occasions. In the past, the tribe was known for their strong physique and fighting skill however during colonial period commercialisation of opium resulted in widespread addiction in the society. As a result most of the people got addicted with opium which made them weak and lethargic physically and mentally. Their physical degeneration was accelerated by the institution of slavery, which was intensified after the Myanmarese invasion into the Brahmaputra Valley. A large number of Singpho were participated in the Myanmarese invasion and said to have captured a good number of plains people whom they later enslaved. Due to practice of the slaves system in the society, people began to depend upon their slaves for every tasks right from household chores to agricultural work which apparently contributed for their illness and weak body. It is said that when the British administration abolished the institution of slavery from the Singpho society the people possessing large numbers of slaves suffered a lot as they had to do all sorts of work by themselves. Being not habituated with menial labour a large number of Singpho slaves’ owner died while trying to do their own work by themselves. 590 Consequently, a large number of

590 KGSL, op.cit.
Singpho migrated back to Myanmar as during those days the slavery system was still prevailing in Myanmar.

After declaration of slavery as an illegal by the government people could not get slaves as much as they required due to which they left from plains of Assam and migrated to Myanmar. It is observed that the British policy of abolition of slavery had an adverse impact on the Singpho society especially in the sphere of economy and standard of living. As the people suffered due to abolition of slavery but they considered it as blessing in disguise for the society, because immediately after the British officials left from the Singpho territory the freed slaves came back to their Singpho masters. Although, the people got back their slaves but they discontinued the practice of slavery rather they had cultivated a positive attitude and began to oppose the slavery system. It might be due to prolonged stay with the masters these slaves learnt culture, language and even adopted Singpho name and surname which made it difficult to differentiate between freed slaves and original Singpho in the society. Besides cultural amalgamation these captives were inseparably admixture as inter-marriage relationship was established among them since they were brought to the Singpho homestead in the second half of the 19th century. Moreover, the British administration declared practice of slavery system as punishable offence and illegal act; and hence after the slaves returned to their masters they were considered as their fellow community members of the Singpho society. Now the people vehemently oppose the slavery system and asserted that it is futile to discuss about original and converted Singpho as it hurts sentiments...
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of the community. The tribe also maintained that there is no point in talking about an individual's past in derogatory manner as the Constitution of India enunciates all are equal before the law and are entitled without discrimination to equal protection of law.

Other than socio-economic aspects, the British intervention on the tribe had its impact on the traditional chieftainship system and political dispensation. The chieftainship system was rigidly maintained in which a chief occupied a highest status in political spheres and was the fountainhead of the village administration per se. Since, the chiefs were the supreme head of the village administration, they take the final decision in the process of dispensing justice. In some cases, however, the chief alone cannot take decision rather they were assisted by a group of council member representing the traditional council called Tra-Ding. This council was considered as the oldest and strongest legal institution among the Singpho community. Although the chief takes final decision at the end of trial proceedings but if the chiefs commit themselves a punishable offence then they were also brought before the council for trial. Thereby, the Tra-Ding was the strongest legal institution, which dispensed justice by punishing the culprit and provided a wergild to the victim after trial proceedings was over. As stated above, the chiefs being a political and administration heads they had to protect their territories from invaders and ensure the safety and security of the villagers. The major reasons for inter-chief fighting were largely related to women, land, cattle, and their revengeful attitudes
towards one another. Most of the internal feuds among the chiefs were because of their personal grudge in order to take revenge on pretty issues.

As the Singpho practiced oligarchic form of chieftainship, the relatives and kinsmen formed the mechanism of defence and other political dispensation of the concerned chiefs. Besides relatives, the chiefs possessed a large number of slaves whom employed as defence mechanism during inter-chief feuds along with their relatives and commoners who remained allegiance to the chief. During pre-colonial period, the chiefs fought among themselves however, after annexation of the Brahmaputra Valley the chiefs had to fight with the British troops to defend their territories. When the tribe came into direct contact with the British, the later gradually suppressed all rebellion chiefs and made them surrendered before the British administration. As such, in 1843 most of the Singpho chiefs surrendered themselves before the British administration by accepting their supremacy and hence they began to follow the British policies and administrative machineries. After Independence, the Government of India did not favour to revive the institution of chieftainship, thus modern political system replaced the traditional chieftainship system in the Singpho territory. Thus owing to government interference the powers of the chiefs were eroded and age-old traditional legal and political institution got modified and changed to match with the modern policies and programme. It was perhaps the people also considered that no human group could remain in fixed state forever without any contact and change. It is observed that those human group who did not
accept change in their society usually find difficult to cope with contemporary environment in the long run.

While discussing the change brought by human contacts D.D.Kosambi rightly puts it as; “Some groups left descendents who advanced to modern civilisation, others just disappeared." In the context of the Singpho, it happened that people accepted the changes brought by the colonial administration after they came into contact with the British. Otherwise, it would have been difficult for the Singpho to survive in their present homesteads if they would have tried to continue their fight against the British. So, they accepted and acclimatized themselves with the new political and judiciary system believing that in order to survive every human group had to be in contact with other group and should accept changes in the community. In this matter, Government of India Act 1935 was the turning point which had given the Governor of Assam the power to exercise the Regulation and a discretionary power to appoint Political Officer in the erstwhile North East Frontier Tracts. As such through the office of the Governor of Assam, Political Officers and government agents were appointed for the Lakhimpur Tract, the Balipara Tract, the Sadiya Tract and the Tirap Tract. The government agents were given judicial and administrative power to implement government policies and to handle both the criminal and civil cases of their respective jurisdiction areas. So, the Act of 1935 became a triggering point in diminution of the chieftainship system from the Singpho society which finally replaced the traditional political

institutions with modern political system. These days it is observed that anyone can preside the trial proceedings of village council and the council members can take final decision without any influence of a chief. If a person is not satisfied with the decision taken by the council at village level, then a case can be taken to the court for seeking justice. In fact, now the people prefer to modern judiciary and political system for maintaining law and order in the villages.

It is known fact that in the early days this traditional village council played a role of maintaining check and balance on political power between a chief and the commoners. Besides legal matters, the council used to take care of social activities like organisation of festival, religious gathering, giving training to the youth on socio-cultural matters and to assist people during the time of calamities like drought, flood and famine. Thus, it could be seem that since early days the people co-operated with the village council. On the other hand, the chiefs required commoners for their political purpose and villagers had to give a certain portion of their productions to the chief to show their allegiance and respect. As such, people were seem to be more inclined towards their village council thus till today they are concerned to revive the power and function of the traditional council in the villages. Whereas people are not interested to revive the institution of chieftainship, rather they are in favour of the modern political system because of its democratic way of functioning and dispersion. It is also observed that till today people respect the family of an erstwhile chief on mutual courtesy though they do not rule the people. Till today the erstwhile chief family
enjoy special status in the socio-cultural life in the society. It could be observed during the funeral rituals as the chiefs’ family member’s funeral rites is always grand than the commoners in the society. There appears to have been a continuing connection between burial and status.\textsuperscript{592} It is maintained that a person might become rich or powerful their funeral rites could not be as grand as the member of chiefs’ family.\textsuperscript{593} Other than this, the eldest male member of the erstwhile chiefs’ family are treated respectfully during certain occasion like social events, marriage ceremony, trial proceedings and festivals till these days.

In general, there was no apparent differences between a commoner and a person belong to the family of a chief as people believed in peaceful co-existence in the society. But the socio-political scenario was different in the olden days as the people were involved in many feuds with their neighbouring tribes, the Ahom authority and later on with the British. It was an established fact that the Singpho expelled some native tribes like the Khampti and the Matak while establishing their settlements in their present homesteads. These days the Khampti and the Matak are the neighbouring tribes with whom they are living together peacefully. There is no doubt that the colonial rule had an adverse affect on the tribe but it is also observed that the people considered the British rule as blessing in disguise for them in many aspects. After the British rule was established in the Brahmaputra Valley, they began to interfere in the internal affairs of native chiefs and later encroached their territories. There was a general understanding that the

\textsuperscript{592} Romila Thapar, \textit{The Penguin History of Early India: From the origins to AD 1300}, \textit{op.cit.}, p.96.  
\textsuperscript{593} RSI, \textit{op.cit.}.  

Singpho joined the Myanmarese invaders due to their cultural affinity. But it is found that the Myanmar Singpho was involved in the invasion whereas the Singpho in Assam side was also plundered like other plain tribes by the invaders. A large number of Singpho had suffered in the hands of Myanmarese army who were taken back to Myanmar as captives along with thousands of Assamese natives.

At this point of time, even some Assamese Singpho made appeal to the British authority to drive out Myanmarese army from Assam in order to end their atrocity inflicted upon the people. As such, the remaining Singpho of Assam were circumscribed to joined with the Myanmarese invaders and carried away huge numbers of plains people whom later on enslaved them which intensified the institution of slavery system in the Singpho society. After the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 the British completely ousted the Myanmarese from Assam and warned the Singpho also due to which they gradually submitted before the British. In the history of Singpho-British relations, the discovery of tea bush was considered as an important event. The discovery of tea plant in 1823 in the Singpho homestead was a turning point in the Anglo-Singpho relations, which converted their political relations into commercial relations. In the initial stage of tea plantation the British encouraged the people to participate in tea business thus, people prefer the British administration than Myanmarese rule in Assam. The presence of tea bush in Assam was introduced by the then Singpho Chief Bisa Nong of Assam to Robert Bruce. It is to be noted that the Chief Bisa Nong made a significant contribution in the history of tea discovery in
Assam but his contribution has not been acknowledged so far. Moreover, he was the person instrumental for bringing the Myanmarese power in Assam against the Ahom monarch and was the only Singpho Chief who was selected as the supreme chief among the Singpho chiefs. It seems that further in-depth investigation and research on the contribution of the Singpho in the field of policies during the colonial period is still wanting.

Although the people did not take proactive role in tea business but they did not oppose the British in commercial activities, and hence both developed a relations based on mutual understanding and compromise. The tribe did not create much problems in expansion of the British commercial activities; while the colonial authority also did not impose any religious policy upon the tribe. In fact, by that period the people had already adopted the Buddhism so it was not easy for the Christian Missionary to convert the people into Christianity. It is believed that the Singpho and Tikhak got converted in Buddhism in the same period in the last part of 19th century.594 Among numbers of circumstantial factors for adopting Buddhism one of the most important reasons was the constant visit of the Buddhist scholars and teachers from Myanmar. It is observed that the people believed that after the visit of the famous religious head of Burma, Rev. PeinDuin Chow Chrado in 1882 to Singpho area the people virtually adopted Buddhism. Even the British were not in favour of forceful conversion of the people as because their homestead was significant for the British from geo-political and commercial point of view. So, the colonial administration did not intervene

in the socio-cultural life of the Singpho and hence people also cultivated a sense of compromise towards the British administration in the long run. Now gradually people became inclined towards the British administration instead of their Myanmarese alliance. Thereby, the Singpho-Myanmarese alliance did not last for long and people resorted to the British administration. Although the commercial profit was lop-sided in British-Singpho commercial relations, but the people compromised with the British so long did not create any annoyance among the people in their socio-cultural life. In the line of foregoing arguments, we may say that the tribe experienced a considerable degree of changes during the colonial phase of administration in the field of economic, political and social. But it would seem that after 1947 the agents of changes became more rapid in the Singpho homesteads which transformed their living standard and way of life.

Broadly speaking, the major agents of social changes are the civic institutions and government machineries like administration, mass-media, science and technology, health centres, schools, colleges, modern politics and religion in the Singpho territory. The growing development in the field of transportation and communication facilitated the people a closer connectivity as such today people are doing trade with outsiders. In the field of education also the tribe made a considerable progress and due to which they could became aware of the facilities provided by the government. The educated people are availing themselves with the government facilities, schemes and supporting the spread of education in the areas. Due to modern developments and access to scientific technology these days the
people are aware of the limitations of traditional treatment system and avoidable expenditure in performing age-old rituals practices. Apart from education and development of technology, the Buddhist way of life brought about a numerous changes among the people. As their religion do not permit the animal sacrifice and at the same time people got settled in agricultural activities in which they required cattle to plough the field. The medical science proved it illogical to sacrifice animal to cure any illness as such, people gave up animal sacrificial rites and resorted to medical science for curing their illness. Nowadays people visit the health centres for physical well-being and for spiritual well-being, they go to the monasteries for prayer and offer gifts according to their wish and seek blessing. Nevertheless, they are having the Buddhist way of life but they did not completely give up their tradition rather they still celebrate their traditional festival called the *Shapawng Yawng Manoi Poi*.

It is to be stated that the people are having a clear concept about difference between religion and culture. They believed that religion is for their spiritual growth and culture is their identity, which they inherited from their ancestors. It is asserted that the tribe should strengthen their social outlook so that the younger generation could also inculcate the importance of faith and culture in one's individual life in particular and among members of the community. Besides socio-cultural development, the traditional political system also modified after adoption of the modern political system. Nowadays, they practised three-tier system of government in the grass root level in the villages. These civic bodies consist of the *Gram*
Panchayat, Anchal Samiti and Zilla Parisad which are now looking after the village administration and development activities. Though, the institution of chieftainship system is no more in active but the Panchayat Members till consult the chief in dealing a major issues related to land, murder, inter-clan dispute and inter-village dispute. In the matter of property inheritance, a positive impact of modernity and spread of education is seen in the society. Earlier a daughter could not inherit immovable property of their parents but these days people consider it a family issue either son or daughter would be inheriting parental property. This social attitude among the tribe seems to be the impact of modern education, and changed social outlook and worldview. It is also observed that a large numbers of boys are addicted to opium so it became a better option for the parents to let the daughter inherits the parental properties instead of boys. Some families may have addicted son who would not be able to look after the properties rather they might sell it \(^595\) and hence, as a mutual social understanding, the Singpho people had reconsider their property inheritance custom.

Thereby, based on the social condition people considered property inheritance as a family issue and they are not stick to customary property inheritance. This is also a positive impact of modernity and education but the society needs to be more specific about eradication of opium addiction in the community. Although government is taking numerous measures to eradicate the addiction but there should be reciprocal attitude from the people. Unless people themselves are not eager to eradicate addiction from

\(^{595}\) IGSI, SNSI, SGSI, RSI et.al, op.cit.
the society all the government measures will go in vain thus people
themselves should take proactive steps in this aspect. In this regard the
socio-cultural and youth organisations should take pro-active in anti-
addiction measures like anti-drug campaign, workshop on opium addiction
and should encourage the youth to indulge in physical and mental exercise.
It is found that the people are trying their best to motivate the younger
generation which could be understand in the annual publication of the
souvenir of Shapawng Yawng Manoi Poi festival celebration. In this souvenir,
the people having authority on the tribe history published article on the
various aspects of their traditions and cultures and the committee
encourages the young people to write their views in the souvenir. Besides
eradication of social evils the people are seem to be concern about
maintaining social harmony with their neighbouring tribes like the Nocte,
the Khamti, the Chakma, the Hajong, the Tangsa, the Kamiyang and the
Lisu.

In order to improve their socio-cultural life the Singpho adopted a
numbers of welfare measures to create a social harmony so that they could
maintain a peaceful co-existence with their neighbouring tribes. In an effort
to maintain communal social harmony, an inter-community cultural hall has
been constructed by the people at Diyun Circle of Changlang District to
facilitate the different communities to showcase their cultural activities by
organising exchange programme in the hall. All the tribes of Changlang
District of the state have rich traditions and cultures so this hall provides a
good platform for cultural exchange and acculturisation among the tribes.
In a nutshell, we may deduce here that, rapid growth of developments and modernisation are seen in every aspects of the Singpho society and many politician, social activist, social work and youth organisations are more conscious about the developmental activities of the society. We may say that the Singpho society is making a right earnest to catch up with the rest of the world in overall progress of the community in this twenty first century. This may be not out of place to state that this piece of research work is not the end of any further comprehensive study on the tribe in question rather it made a sincere attempt to generate a viable debate for future researchers in the field.