

## **SOCIETY, FAMILY, VILLAGE AND HOUSING PATTERN – A STUDY OF THE SINGPHOS OF NORTH EAST INDIA**

Ashwini Machey

Research Scholar, Department of Economics,  
Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh- 4, Assam, India

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Singphos are one of the frontier tribe inhabited in the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh adjoining the Patkai hill in North East India. In China this tribe is known as Jingpo and in Burma as Kachin. A total of 7958 Singpho people with 3999 males and 3959 females are living in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (Census 2011). Large concentrations of this people are in Tinsukia district of Assam and Changlang, Lohit and Namsai districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Moreover, small sizes of the Singpho speaking people are living in Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam.

The meaning of the word '*Singpho*' is explained in various ways. In their own dialect the word '*Singpho*' means 'man'. J.F. Needham (1888) mentions that the word Chingpaw, Theinbaw, Kachin and Singpho must all refer to the same tribe as all these imply the same meaning, i.e. 'man'. At the same time it may be mentioned that the word Chingpaw (*Singpho*) means a '*pure Kachin*' and since all the pure Kachins claim their origin from the river source, it is only natural to assume that the Singphos are closely related to the '*Kakus*' (i.e. Kachin of Burma), a term literally meaning 'a man' or 'a man from the upper stream'. The term Kaku is used by the southern Kachins or the Chingpaws while referring to the northerns. Thus, Singphos dwelling in the tracts of the Burhi Dehing, Noa-Dehing, Tengapani and Hukwang valley used this name to denote their kinsmen living further up in the north east. Similarly, the Kakus describe the Singphos as the men of hot country, a term referring to their kinsmen who lived down-streams. The Singphos belong to the race called Burmese Kakhyens or Kakus, whose original settlements were on the great eastern branches of the Irrawady river; they are there in contact with the Kunungs, with whom they are closely allied in language and origin (Dalton, 1872). According to Hanson (1912), "The *Singpho* of Assam is the same as the *Jinghpaw* or Kachin of Burma. The Assamese being unable to pronounce the word *Jinghpaw*, render it *Singphaw*". The Singphos live intermixed with the Khamtis, the country watered by the Burhi Dehing, the Noa-Dehing and the Tengapani. The real home of the Singphos is in the hilly country between the Chindwin river

and the Patkai hill where they are known as *Kakhyens*. The name by which they are known to the Assam frontier is simply the tribal word for 'man' (Gait, 2008). Colonel Hannay mentions the Singphos are identical to the race Kakus or Kakhyens of Burma whose chief habitat was on the great eastern branch of the Irrawadi. They extend nearly as far South as lat. 25° North, while touching on the north and east the borders of China in lat. 27° North (Elwin, 1972).

According to the oral history of the Singphos, their ancestors migrated from 'Majoi Singra Bum' or 'Nojoi Singra Bum' which means naturally flat mountain. It may be somewhere in the highland of Mongolia. Ningkhee (2008) in his writings reveal that the Singphos originally migrated from Mongolia almost in 700-800 B.C. Entered the south west of Tibet in around in 600-300 B.C. and settled down in the Tsangpo valley over 400 years and during the period 300 B.C. to 100 A.D., the Singphos entered the Brahmaputra valley.

The Singphos of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are divided into four groups, locally known as *Numhpuk Hkawng*, *Diyun Hkawng*, *Tieng Hkawng* and *Turung Hkawng*. *Hkawng* is a term meaning 'area' and each of these groups is named after a local river. *Numhpuk* is a Singpho term incorporating the word for a women, *num*.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The significance of the study is to uncover the traditional life of the Singphos. History has been testimony to the fact that the Singphos were power full warrior tribe among the various tribes live in North East India. Earlier the Singphos lived in large area of Patkai hill range with their rich tradition, custom, culture and social and political system. After advent of British in this part of the country; the Singphos became addicted of opium and consequently they lost warrior character. Moreover, the Singpho community distributed and scattered in three different countries namely India, Myanmar (Burma) and China. Hence they lost their political heritage. At this juncture it is necessary to study tradition, prevalence and practices of the Singpho community.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The prime objectives of the study are to understand and revisit the Singphos traditional society, family, village and housing pattern.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Triangulation method is employed for the study. To spatial coverage of the study from each district one large and oldest village is considered for the purposed. Altogether four villages

selected purposively from four districts namely Tinsukia district of Assam, Changlang, Lohit and Namsai districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The study is descriptive in nature.

## **DISCUSSION AND FINDING**

Each community is characterized by distinctive social, family, village and housing pattern, religion, festivals, language and has a peculiar custom regarding birth, marriage and death. In this study tried to trace the society, family, village and housing pattern of the Singphos.

## **SOCIETY OF THE SINGPHOS**

The Singpho society is famous for its well organized social nature. Their society is divided into a number of clans each under the control of a chief. In Singpho language a clan is term as '*fan*' implying same blood relation. There are five clans among the Singphos i.e. *Marip*, *Lahtaw*, *Laphai*, *Nhkum* and *Maran*. The village chief is called *Agi* or *Mireng Agi* in whom the social and political control of the village rest. Chieftainship is an important feature of the Singpho society and it is hereditary. The Singpho chief is considered to be the head not only of the village but also of the entire territory under his jurisdiction. The chief has several privileges and has the authority to use of whole land under his jurisdiction. (Baruah, 1977). The chief also exercises judicial powers over the villages and decides all cases except inter village disputes, punishing the offenders found guilty. The severity of the punishment depends upon the nature of the crime and the status of the offenders. The chief is also empowered to expel any offender from the village if the latter refuses to obey his order. In legal matters, the chief is assisted by his counselors. The number of the counselors is determined by the villagers and the selected members depend upon his personal influence and wisdom. In certain exceptional cases the chief accepts the advice of his counselor members but generally he takes independent decisions in matters of day to day disputes.

The system of monarchy does not prevail in the Singpho society at present. But earlier, every village had a chief who controlled the whole village. The legal and administrative powers of the villages were vested in the chief and it was his responsibility to direct all village activities relating to the welfare and wellbeing of the villagers.

The most important position in the social hierarchy is given to the *Gaonbura* (village headman). Another important person in a Singpho village is the *Dumsa* (priest) who presides over the religious ceremonies. The *Dumas* is not found in every village and their services can be hired.

There are no written laws and codes in the Singpho society. The villagers settle the minor problems with the aid of the chief and his counselors. All the disputes among the villagers are settled by the village *rung jata* (assembly or counselor). This assembly of elders is held at the

chief's house and it is empowered to give judgment in case any dispute arises (Dutta, 1990). If the offender is found guilty, he is convicted and punished by the *rung jata*.

### **FAMILY OF THE SINGPHOS**

The Singpho family system is patriarchal and the father is regarded as the head of the family. The Singpho term for the head of the family is *intana mitow*. Both nuclear and joint family systems are prevalent in the Singpho society. The society maintains their relationship through the male line. They have own belief that prior to the existence of human beings in the world, a certain semi-mythological figure came down from the heavens, split into two, and six brothers came out of it and they were *Gam, Nong, La, Du, Tang* and *Yawng* and till now accordingly the nomenclature of the Singphos goes on. The youngest son, also known as '*Shapawng Yawng*', became the forefather of the Singphos or the Kachins. According to Hanson (1912), the Singphos are the descendants of a certain *Wahket wa*, a semi-mythological figure. His five oldest sons became the progenitors of the five recognized families of chieftains. The Shapawng Yawng's grandson '*Wahkyet wa*' became the father of nine sons. Out of the nine families only five families are with Chieftains. They are *Marip, Lahtaw, Lahpai, Nhkum* and *Marans*. The nomenclature of the sons and daughters of the Singpho communities are -

| <i>Order</i>    | <i>Male (Shadang Sha)</i> | <i>Female (Shayisha)</i> |
|-----------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> | <i>Gam</i>                | <i>Kaw</i>               |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> | <i>Nong</i>               | <i>Lu</i>                |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> | <i>La</i>                 | <i>Roi</i>               |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> | <i>Du</i>                 | <i>Thu</i>               |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> | <i>Tang</i>               | <i>Kai</i>               |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> | <i>Yawng</i>              | <i>Kha</i>               |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> | <i>Kha</i>                | <i>Pi</i>                |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> | <i>Shroi</i>              | <i>Yune</i>              |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> | <i>Enking</i>             | <i>Dim</i>               |

Father has the responsibility to look after the family. On his death the eldest son takes the position and bears the complete responsibility of the family and the family property is divided among the sons into equal parts. But the one who stays with the parents to look after their welfare gets an additional share. A female member has no right to the family property but she

can use it freely. The widow has however a share in the property left behind by her deceased husband. The members of the family work jointly for their livelihood. A joint family meal is prepared in one hearth by the eldest female member. The family properties both movable and immovable, such as cultivable lands, utensils, clothing, live stock valuable ornaments etc. are held as common. The earning of an individual member is his own, but when he lives in the joint family he has to give half of his income to the head of the family and can keep the rest for his personal use.

### **VILLAGE OF THE SINGPHOS**

The Singphos live in high and dense forest areas and depend on forest resources and agriculture for their livelihood. The Singpho villages are large and the houses spread over a considerable area facing all directions. The village is called '*miriyeng*' by the Singphos. The name of the village is based on by the clan name of the founder. Every villager has a plot of agricultural land at edge of the village.

Waddell (1909) has mentioned that the Singpho villages are usually situated on secure locations and the individual house is exceptionally large, eighty to hundred feet long, with a raised wooden platform, and divided into various compartments. According to Hunter (1879), "The Singphos occupy large villages, often in somewhat unassailable position, consisting of sixty or more large houses, each from eighty to one hundred feet long. The house was divided into a different apartment on both sides of a long passage open from one end to another end".

### **HOUSING PATTERN OF THE SINGPHOS**

The Singphos live in raised platform (locally known as Chang Ghar). The Singpho house is constructed three to five feet above the ground, well set on a few sliced lags. The dwelling house is called '*Nta*'. They are found living in *Nta* in the vicinity of forests, rivers and streams. Generally the size and long of the Singpho house varies depending upon the size of the family. A Singpho house has mainly three parts: the *Nbang* (front), the *Dun* (middle) and *Npan* (rear). They use *lakhann* (strir) go up and enter the house. The entire floor area is partitioned into several chambers. They give different names to the chambers. The living room is called *yup khok*, the guest room is called *manam khok*, the entrance room or first compartment from the front side is called *imbangtutat* or *rang tun* or *nbang* and the firewood store is called *Npan*. For a joint family the household has small compartments where each individual family is accommodated (Dutta, 1990). The first compartment is generally use for manam (guest) and there is a fire hearth. In the second compartment where old parents sleep, is called *ganugawa-tap*. The third compartment is occupied by the eldest son and his wife (*kha ang dun*). Each married couple occupies a separate compartment. The younger ones sleep towards the rear

compartment (*dum'nta*) and the unmarried girls sleep in the rear most compartments (*pinla kha'k*) (Rajkumar 1978). At the centre of the chamber is the fire hearth called *indab kap* for cooking so that the members of the family can sit or make arrangements for sleeping around the hearth, so that they can get the heat from the burning fire. Over the hearth there is a hanging smoking rake at a height of about 3 to 4 feet from the floor. Bamboo shelves are built on the walls of this compartment where they keep the cooking utensils, cooked food and other articles. This shelf is called *chufa*. Under the shelf there is a place called *chingthun chinat*, where they keep the water reservoirs.

Attached to the front side is the open bamboo platform called *imbang chan*, where they dry their paddy and other articles. The *imbang* is used for their loom and other accessories required for weaving. At the eastern most corner of the *imbang* close to the roof, there is a small shelf for worship, where they keep either an image or a statue of Lord Buddha. They decorate the place of worship with flowers. The worship place is called '*chuwom tan char*'. The Singpho houses are very simple, without any decoration. They are very particular about keeping the house neat and clean. Their sitting tools are only small pieces of wood, with two legs fitted to it. Some of them have sitting tools made of bamboo. They do not make any other furniture for themselves. One of the important features of the Singphos is that they take their meal early in the morning. Before taking meal they offer meal to Lord Buddha at place of worship and also send meal for the monk reside at monastery.

## CONCLUSION

History of human society reveals that change in the society; institutions, customs, traditions, economy and politics are continuous process throughout the ages. The rate and dimensions of change may differ from society to society, but the facts remain that changes occur in every human society. In this regard the Singphos are not exceptional but the dynamics is very slow. In fact, the Singphos strongly retain their own tradition even long colonial period and in the epoch of globalization.

## REFERENCES

1. Boruah, T. K. M. (1977) *The Singpho and their Religion*, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Shillong.
2. Census 2011
3. Dalton, E. T. (1872) *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta, p 14.
4. Dutta, P. C. (1990) *The Singphos*, Director of Research, Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar.
5. Elwin, V. (1972) *India's North East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, third impression, Oxford University Press, p 385.

6. Gait, E. (2008) *History of Assam*, EBH Publishers (India) Guwahati.
7. Hanson, O. (2012) *The Kachin*, Cambridge University Press, New York, p 12. (original 1913)
8. Hunter, W.W. (1979) *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol 1 and Vol 2.
9. Needham, J. F. (1888) *Journey Along the Lohit Brahmaputra, Between Sadiya in Upper Assam and Rima in South-Eastern Tibet*. London.
10. Ningkhee, R. (2008) *Singpho Samaj Aru Sabhyata*, Published by Folk Cultural Research Centre of North East India, Nagaon.
11. Rajkumar, S. (1982) *Singfau Janagoshthi*, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat.
12. Waddell, L.A. (2000) *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley*, Logos Press, New Delhi. (original 1901)