

Between Cultural Continuity and Changes: With special reference to Singpho community



Sujata Sonowal¹, Sukanya Sonowal²

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya

²PhD Research Scholar, Tata Institute Of Social Sciences (TISS, Guwahati)

ABSTRACT: Many people across the globe are ignorant about the subsistence of Northeast India. They are unaware and fail to recognize the distinction between the local residents and the people residing in the neighbouring countries like China, Myanmar, Nepal or Mongolia. Assam, which is located in the heart of Northeast region, is a land of many cultures, tribes and religion. Out of many tribal groups in Northeast India, the Singpho tribe is considered to be one of the most significant tribe, inhabiting in Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat district of Assam and also Namsai, Lohit and Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh (Machey, 2015). Originally they were the Kachins of upper Burma. According to Singpho oral history they were the descendants of Shwapawng Yowng, from Manoi Singra Bum. They have been continuing their rich culture and lives in neighboring states. The Singphos are well known as the warrior tribe of Assam and Arunachal border in Northeast India. They are mainly the followers of Buddhism and have cultural homogeneity between the Singphos of Assam and the Kachin.

Through this study, the researcher attempt to uncover the in-depth study of cultural changes that are taking place in the Singpho community. The study will focus on the social lifestyle through different aspects i.e. social customs, religion, festivals, dresses, livelihood etc. Through this study it will try to find out the present status of Singpho community.

KEYWORDS: Singpho, culture, social change, Arunachal Pradesh, North-East.

INTRODUCTION

India's Northeast is a region is a home to different cultural and ethnic groups, who have settled down here at different period of time. Today, due to cultural interactions and social integration, people who followed varied culture, religion and customs live together in every part of the region. Arunachal Pradesh is a federal state of India, located in the far north-east. The majority of its territories are acclaimed by the People's Republic of China as part of its Tibetan Autonomous Region. (Mahanta, 2011). It is known as the land of rising sun because of its position towards the easternmost state of India. Arunachal Pradesh is a land of many cultures, tribes and religion. Here we find different communities like Abor, Aka, Apatani, Nishin, Adi, Khampti, Wancho, Nocte, Tangsa, Singpho etc living in the same locality and villages across the state. Among these tribal groups in Arunachal Pradesh, the Singpho tribe is considered to be one of the most significant tribe inhabiting in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh (Machey, 2015).

The origin of the Singphos is largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be authentic history. According to A.F.Hanney(Mahanta,2011) the Singphos were the original inhabitants of the Shan States in Upper Burma and they came to Assam in 1793. The Singphos, are hill tribe among other, which in China is known as Jingphow, in India as Singpho and in Burma, they are regarded as Kachin. They were known as Singphos, only on the spread of the valley of Assam, which in their own local language means 'Man' (Nath, 2013). Out of many tribe's in NER, the Singpho tribe is one of the most important tribes of the North East India, which is a Mongoloid stock inhabiting in the Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Golaghat districts of Assam and also Lohit, Namsai and Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh (Machey, 2015).

Culture is one of the most important instruments for the existence of the society. It is a unique possession of man. It is one of the distinguishing traits of human society (Rao, 2011). It is also stated that 'man is a cultural being'. Culture is basically something that is created and cultivated by man. Culture is not inherited biologically but learnt socially by man. It is often referred to as learned ways of behavior. It is through culture which helps man to develop human qualities in a human environment. Culture is being transmitted from generation to generation. It is transmitted not through genes but by means of language. Culture of any society undergoes changes. It is dynamic in nature. Invention and popularization of different new trend leads to change in culture of a society. Due to assimilation and different culture coming in content to a dominant culture leads to change in the realm of culture in an existing society.

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Culture is a universal phenomenon. Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, custom, tradition etc acquired by man as a member of society that are passed from one generation to the next. Although the particulars of culture may differ from one another but it is shared and learned ways of participating in the world. Culture can also be a force that generates discord, conflict and even violence. It is because of change in society. Social change often occurs when a society is forced to face and work through, its value contradictions.

Thus, the study enables to bring into light the traditional customs, practices, and rituals of the Singphos which help to portray their unique identity and also try to find out the changes and continuity that is taking place in their community. The study also try to focus on the changes in the cultural practices that took place with the change in the duration of time and the various influences that are still prevalent in the cultural practices of the community. It is also helping in analyzing the loopholes of the existing literature found, as there are very less literature found in relation to cultural changes basically of the Singphos which are now beginning to wane. This study will make a significant beginning to delve deep into the past as well as present to deal with comparative issues related to tradition and modernity.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the cultural aspects like social customs, religion, festivals etc. associated with Singpho community.
2. To study the continuity and changes in their cultural practices.

TECHNIQUES OF DATA COLLECTION

The study is based on both the primary as well as the secondary data. The purposed study is basically based on qualitative method. Primary data is collected through interview schedule, non-participant observation and sampling technique. Secondary data were collected from books and articles and by using information from web-pages. It also incorporates exploratory research method as it tries to explore the past.

UNIVERSE OF THE STUDY

The study is conducted in Bordumsa village of Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh. The area consists of 276 household and a population of 454 people. It is composed mostly of Singpho community people, together with a few amounts of other community people such as the Nepali, Kachari, and Bengali etc. The village is composed of a 'Gaon Panchayat' which look after any kind of issues that affects the village people. But the physical structure of the village is very backward. In terms of education the village is very much limited and only a few could able to complete their education. Also the village has only '1 Hospital i.e. Bordumsa Civil Hospital' that is very far away from the village. The main livelihood of the villagers is 'Agriculture'.

Therefore the discussion in this study is mostly based on the data collected from this village.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Exposure to the field has provided empirical reality which is closely related in defining the pattern among the Singphos. To give a generic view of the findings from the field has become a matter of conjecture and perplexed situation as the data from the field provided only a partial segment of the study that was undertaken encompassing mainly the contemporary patterns of culture. But with the gradual process of interaction with influential and known persons, it made the study more interesting and worth studying gathering incites of traditional cultural practices as well.

TRADITIONAL PATTERNS OF CULTURE:

The Family Structure:

The Singpho society is a patriarchal society and the 'father' is the head of the family. He bears all the responsibility of the family from earning money to the protecting the household and the family members. The family maintains their relationship through the male line. Generally the male member is very much involved in agriculture and marketing activities while the female members are involved in all types of household activities like cooking, taking care of children and various other domestic works. On the death of the father the eldest son takes all the responsibilities of the family and the family property is divided among the sons into equal parts. A female member has no right to her father's property.

Food And Drinks:

The Singpho society is an agrarian society. Agricultural product is main base of the Singphos. They are non-vegetarian and rice eaters. Rice is the staple food and other principal items of food are sago, millet, maize, and pulses like beans, and other eatables found from nature. Rice beer and tea are two beverages without which the Singphos cannot pass their time. According to the Singphos the tea has some medicinal quality which could cure simple pain and burning of stomach. There are three forms of rice beer prepared by the Singphos i.e. Tsa, Sing Kong Khu and Lalo.

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Dresses And Ornaments:

The Singpho women are expert weavers and make dresses for both male and female in their looms at home. In earlier period cotton was being harvested and then woven to make traditional dresses. The women folk generally wear 'Bukang' (mekhela), Chinket (peti), Nangwat (belt), Plong (shirt) etc. with the clothes locally woven in their homes. While the Singpho men wear traditional home made garments like Buka (yard), Plong (shirt), Fumbum (head dress), Yamplong (shirt) etc. The Singpho men folk carry with them a traditional bag called 'Maphong' and a sharp sword called 'Nthu'.

Marriage Customs:

To know about the marriage customs the information are gathered from both middle aged as well as senior respondents. In Singpho community both polygamy and monogamy system of marriage is accepted in the society. Polygamy form of marriage arises from the obligation of a man to assume the responsibility from his brother's widow. Marriage is strictly prohibited from own patrilineal siblings. In traditional society marriage within clan or group is not permitted. Exchange marriage between two families was not permitted. Divorce and remarriage are not allowed.

Religion And Sacrifices:

The Singphos had no evidence available regarding their early religion. The principal deities are Munat (Indra), Mreng Nut (deity of villages), Inta Sumathi (God of houses), Funnut (deity of trees) etc. to whom they used to offer their prayers. The Singphos have largely converted to Buddhism in 1800. They usually celebrate the birth anniversary of Lord Buddha on the full moon day and visit the Gompa (Buddha Temple) for universal peace and prosperity. Buddha Purnima celebration is named as "Changkenpoy" in their local language.

Festivals:

According to the village head Siketong Singpho, the "Shapawng Yawang Manau Poi" is the most important traditional festival of the Singphos. "Shapawng Yawang" is celebrated for development of their land and people. To celebrate the festival they used to erect traditional platforms "Shadung" which is the symbol of this festival. A pair of bamboo posts of equal length was projected at the centre of "Shadung". One of them is called "Dunguri" and the other "Dungla" stand as a symbol of male and female. Likewise the tops of these middle poles are painted with the images of Sun and Moon. At the time of erecting "Shadung" the Singphos would gather around to perform a traditional dance called "Gikhin Gumdin Manao". The main basis of this festival is to unite all the Singpho people and to rediscover and develop their culture.

CONTEMPORARY CHANGES IN CULTURAL PATTERN

The contemporary stage is the stage of change. Change is the essence of every society and is universal. In the contemporary society changes occurs due to various reasons such as the coming of science and development of education and various other reasons. Likewise with the change of society, the Singpho traditional patterns of culture have also undergone changes.

As stated by the respondent, some of the practices are still prevalent. The continuing practice firstly, involves the continuation of the "Shapawng Yawang Manau Poi" dance festival which is celebrated in the month of February. The main reason behind this dance is that the Singpho community aspires to remain united with the feeling of love, harmony and brotherhood. The custom of animal sacrifice is performed during the Munat (Indra), Mreng Nut (deity of villages), Inta Sumathi (God of houses), Funnut (deity of trees) etc. to whom they used to offer their prayers. Besides the "Shapawng Yawang Manau Poi" and the other religious practices a lot of changes is prevalent in the marriage, language, dress pattern, family structure etc. Because of the gradual transformation of time a lot of changes took place both in society as well as in the cultural practices in almost all societies. According to young youth a lot of positive as well as negative changes were taking place in their community. The main reason behind the changes in their culture is the prevalence of assimilation of other community. The young youth accepted the custom of inter-caste marriage, late marriage, and widow re-marriage. To attain higher education youth come out of their village and adapt different food habit, dress pattern with the change of time. The occupational mobility has helped the Singpho people to adjust themselves to the modern professional world. Economic independence of women is also one of the modern trends prevalent among the Singphos community. In the village, educated women formed Mahila Samittees and Self- Help Groups to make the less educated women self dependent.

Moreover because of education, assimilation of different community the Singphos is lagging behind their own practices. Mainly because of assimilation with the mainstream Assamese people the main origin of the Singphos is in a verge to wipe out. Also due to inter-caste marriage, the Singphos practice different religious practices, speak other languages and thus their main identity is declining. Among the younger generation there is very less prevalence of their Singpho dialect. Another reason for the decline of Singphos is that the people are still in continuation with the consumption of opium. Because of Opium consumption which is a death causing drug the population of Singphos is declining. Due to modernization a lot of changes is also prevalent in the dress pattern, food habit etc.

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CONCLUSION

From the analysis of the data discussed the study provided only a partial segment. It was only with the gradual process of interaction with influential and known persons the study could be made possible.

Due to the development of education, modernization and the change of society people started thinking rationally and led to the emergence of inter caste marriage, assimilation, modernization which led to the decline of origin of the Singpho community. Moreover the influence from other community such as the Assamese cultural practices also led to the decline of singpho traditional ritualistic practices. The singpho tribal community has undergone tremendous changes in all most all aspects of life such as dress pattern, marriage pattern, livelihood etc. It can be largely connected with the concept of 'folk-urban continuum'. Moreover due to these rational changes and the continuation of the consumption of opium the Singpho community is in a verge to decline.

The current present status of the singpho community is that the community is becoming concern regarding their existence. Thus many social activist like Rajesh Singpho, Manjela Singpho and Pabitra Ningha is trying very hard to make the people aware about their community and to bring into light their different cultural tradition beliefs and customs among the younger generation. Also many research scholars from renowned institutes are conducting their study in the singpho community and to bring into light the existence in their mainland India.

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