

# Struggle For Survival: The Rongmei Nagas In Barak Valley

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper looks into the perception of the Rongmei Naga of Barak Valley, Assam. Most of the Rongmei Naga lives in the State of Manipur but a stream of migrating Rongmei had reached the Cachar district of Assam and settled here. The non-tribal settlers of the area have named the area as Nagapunji meaning Naga helmets. Although the Rongmei had a long relationship with the plains people of Cachar and a relationship of amity, mutual exchanges and peaceful co-existence was a historical tradition, settlement in Barak Valley posed some serious challenges to them. Firstly they were completely cut off from their main habitat in Manipur. As a result they found it hard to reproduce and perpetuate their traditions, religion and culture. Secondly, after the British occupation of Cachar and the Partition of India, the Bengal Hindu and Muslim population increased manifolds. This tremendous explosion of non-tribal population threatened the small demographic strength of the Rongmei as well as pressure on the land resources. The Rongmei practices shifting cultivation for which they needed large amount of freely available land so that they could change their farm land every ten years. The Rongmei not only had to give their agricultural pursuit due to the non-availability of land, they began to be displaced from their traditional habitat. Thirdly, living amidst non-tribal population who were mostly Hindu practicing a Brahmanic ideology with its accompanying caste structure, the animist beef eating Rongmei were threatened of being treated as untouchables. They were social ostracized by the Muslims too as they were pork eaters. Pushed thus to the territorial as well as social margins, the Rongmei are fighting for survival as an ethnic groups as well as cultural groups.*

**Keywords:** Barak Valley, Rongmei, Challenges, Changes.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Barak Valley is in the southern region of the Indian State of Assam. Barak Valley originating in the Barail Range (Assam-Nagaland border) flows through the Cachar district wide valley and enters Bangladesh with the name Surma. The main city of the valley is Silchar. The place is named after the Barak River. The Barak Valley consist of three districts, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi are situated between 24°8 and 25°15" N latitude and 92°20" and 93°15" E longitude covering a geographical area of 6962 sq km. The Cachar district has two sub-divisions namely, Silchar and Lakhimpur. Hailakandi and Karimganj districts have only one sub-division each. The Barak Valley region surrounded by Khasi-Jaintia and North Cachar Hills in the North, the state of Manipur in the East, the state of Mizoram in the South, and the state of Tripura and the Sylhet district of Bangladesh in the West. The population of the Cachar District is composed of different communities, viz., Bengali Hindu, Bengali Muslim, Manipuri, Assamese, Tea Garden and Hill Tribes like Jaintia, Rieng, Chorai, Hmar, Hrangkhoh, Mizo, Vaiphei Paite, Karbi, Rongmei Naga and Kuki etc. The Hill tribes have a distinct group in term of diverse multi-ethnic tribal group since historical period. These tribal groups with the unique tradition, culture and which have inherited a rich cultural heritage and varied constitute an important component of North East India. Most of the Rongmei Naga lives in the Indian state of Manipur but a stream of migrating Rongmei had reached the Cachar district of Assam and settled here. Today the Rongmei spread over 42 villages and with a population of 20,000 and around 1314 households in Barak Valley of Assam. The Rongmei Naga tribe was recognized in Assam with the declaration of 1951, the Government of India ("Any Naga, Any Kuki and Any Lushai Tribe"). Among these 42 villages, Namdaihuang, Binnakandi and Kaguiluang (Phatok Bazar) are the biggest and the most prominent village. The Rongmei do have a rich folklore, myths and legends, folk songs, folk tale and ballads and oral traditions which have passed down from generation to generation but remained unwritten for a very long time.

The Rongmei Naga tribe form one of the ethnic groups of Zeliangrong people in the North Eastern Part of India and also one of the major tribes of Naga inhabited in the North Eastern region of India since pre-historic time. Dr G.A Grierson in his monumental "Linguistic Survey of India" has identified that the Rongmei Tribe belong to the Naga-Bodo Sub-Family Tibeto-Burman group. (1) Dr. S.K Chatterjee, an Indian philologist also grouped the *kabui* under the Indo-Mongoloids, which he suggests is that the *kabui* in language and races is related to the Tibeto-Burman. (2) The Rongmei Naga are scattered in the three different parts of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. In Assam, they are found in Silchar, Sonai and Lakhimpur west of Silchar sub-division of Cachar district and in Hailakandi. Their folk songs and religious hymns show that they had been living in the present habitat for a number of centuries in the distant. The name Rongmei have now officially recognized by the Schedule Tribe order Amendment in 2011 granting ST (mostly Hills) Government of India under the ST status 6<sup>th</sup> Manipur Tribe on December 2011. The Rongmei Naga people do have a long history as well as rich socio-cultural heritage of their own. They have a great respect for their traditions handed down through the ages. With their well knitted social organization, they developed and practice a well institutionalized cultural pattern. Their religious sacrifices, annual festivals, beautiful dances and diversely classified songs and hymns have greatly enriched the Rongmei culture. They are believed to come out from the mythical cave known as Mahou Taobhei. They lived at Makhel. From Makhel they came down to a deep gorge called Ramtin Kabin, They settled down at Changwang Phungning also known as Guang-phungning and then they further settled down to Makuilongdi (meaning 'big round mountain'). According to the Rongmei oral tradition, Zeme, Liangmei and Rongmei and including Inpuimei scattered from Makuilongdi to different direction. From this place the Zeliangrong culture marked as the beginning. From there they isolated towards different regions to the South, West and the North. Majority of the Rongmei people concentrated in the state of Manipur and Tamenglong west district of Manipur is the main home town of the Rongmei. They are one of the most adventurous groups.

## II. TRADITIONAL WAY OF OCCUPATION

The traditional occupation of the Rongmei Naga has been agriculture in their original habitat in Manipur. The tribes of North East India depend mainly on cultivation. The method of cultivation is based on the old age system of slash and burn cultivation; this cultivation method is called shifting or jhumming. The agricultural products were for consumption and hardly directed towards the markets. In the traditional economic system, they work in the jhum field and produced to meet their domestic subsistence. Traditionally the Rongmei, usually a small hut is constructed near the field to store the produce. It also serves as a recreation centre. The Rongmei practice of frequently shifting their fields and sometimes also their settlements was appropriate to a situation in which they were virtually the only inhabitants of large expanses of cultivable land and forest, and there were no other claimants to land. As the practices of shifting cultivation for which they needed large amount of freely available land so that they could change their farm land every ten years. Agricultural land played the main source of income in their socio-economic life.

The tribes of North East India depend mainly on cultivation. The method of cultivation is based on the old age system of slash and burn cultivation; this cultivation method is called shifting or jhum. The common tradition tools used by Rongmei are daos, spears, sickle etc. Besides paddy they also raised, maize, millets, sesame, ginger, brinjal and vegetables of different varieties. In the traditional economy system, they worked in the jhum field and produced to meet their domestic needs. The agricultural products were for consumption and hardly directed towards the markets. In the traditional economic system, they work in the jhum field and produced to meet their domestic subsistence. These jhum fields are made of the forest lands in which trees or bamboos or both are cut down and burnt down and then cultivate the land for 2/3 years till the soil was exhausted. And paddy and others crops are planted. After the harvest, the land is again left fallow to be recultivated in the next cultivated in the next cycle after five years or lesser period.(3) The cycle of jhum cultivation in Rongmei area varies from five to ten years. U.G. Bower has remarked a particular system of migration which she calls as "cycle migration".(4) In search of location of the area for shifting they migrated to different area of jhum cultivation in a particular area or year due to non-availability of cultivable land within the village territory. The cyclical jhum cultivation changes both the area of the jhum cultivation and the sites of human settlements. (5)

Besides shifting cultivation, the Rongmeis are greatly skilled in bamboo, wood, blacksmith and pottery works. The raw materials for the same are easily available. Bamboo baskets, mats, shields etc. are manufactured in a great way. Bamboos and canes are used for domestic purpose such as making baskets, chairs, tables, etc. Bamboos are used for various purposes like

constructing houses, fencing and fetching water and for cooking rice and curry. The menfolk are engaged in the wood-works, cane and bamboo crafts and black smith. They produce baskets of cane and bamboo, wooden bowls, wooden cups, wooden mortars and pestles, etc. The Rongmeis are also skilled in traditional arts and crafts of weaving, blacksmith, wood works, canes and bamboo crafts which occupy a very central position. Planting of cotton were practiced and they spun yarns in the indigenous wood-spinning machine for cloth making. Especially, the art of weaving occupies one of the most important positions which is a common village industry done by the womenfolk. (6)

In the past their economic activity carried on through the clan and lineage when there was scarcity of food or any natural calamity occurred. Their kinsmen and relatives stood by their side through cooperative efforts. But after migrated in Barak Valley they were outnumbered by the plains people and far away from their kinsmen. Materially and intellectually relatively advanced plains people of the valley were obsessed with a notion of superiority in the behavioural ways has since been acting as a gap between the tribal and non-tribal folks in the valley. In the past, method of wet cultivation was totally not known by the Rongmei as a result they generated their resources exclusively from shifting cultivation. In the olden days, forest played vital role of the Rongmei people and closely connected with their daily life style. The economy of the Cachar district is basically agrarian in nature with about 80 percent of population dependent on agriculture. Both men and women are engaged in labour work. The method of wet cultivation was widely practice by most of the plains dweller in the valley.

The Rongmei Naga tribe dependence on forests as their primary sources of livelihood since the earliest period however they not only had to give up their agricultural pursuit due to the non-availability of land, they began to be displaced from their traditional habitat. They adopting non-agricultural occupations by gradually increasing the number of people, particularly near the urban areas are another decreasing yield of the practice of shifting cultivation. The encroachment of many outsiders has threatened on the earlier habitats. The process of the gradual displacement forced them to abandon their traditional agricultural methods.

In the earlier days, forests are owned by them as much as they own land and no other outsiders can claim on their forests and forest products. With the influx of new settlers in the Barak Valley, the pressure on land became the main issue. The outsiders were more advance in economically. The economic situation of the Rongmei was rather not good enough; they do not work what is necessary to earn enough for their daily needs. For their livelihood they rear livestock like, pig, chicken, dog and cow etc., these are reared mostly in order to meet the family requirement of meats for domestics' consumptions, observance of religious rituals and socio- economic festivals in the village, which is still a common feature in many of the villages. In the olden days the main source of income to maintain was agriculture which becomes threat to cultivation. They remain economically poor. They were aware of the difficulties arising out of the shortage of food.

### III. LARGE SCALE OF MIGRATION OF NON-TRIBAL INTO THE AREAS

A steady stream of landless farmers had begun to migrate and settle in Cachar from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The Brahmin and the high caste people from Bengal also rushed to Cachar seeking employment. As a result, in 1736, by the time Raja Kirtichandranarayan, appointed one Maniram Laskar of Barkhola as the Uzir to deal with the settlement of the new-comers from Bengal. (7) After the Partition of India in 1947 the Bengal Hindu & Muslim population was increased manifolds. This tremendous explosion of non-tribal population not only threatened the small demographic strength of the Rongmei people, the pressure on the land resources which forced them to engage in different kind of jobs to earn their livelihood. This has affected the traditional economic life of people adversely. The Rongmei Naga tribe dependence on forests as their primary sources of livelihood since the earliest period however they not only had to give up their agricultural pursuit due to the non-availability of land, they began to be displaced from their traditional habitat. They adopting non-agricultural occupations by gradually increasing the number of people, particularly near the urban areas are another decreasing yield of the practice of shifting cultivation. The encroachment of many outsiders has threatened on the earlier habitats. The process of the gradual displacement forced them to abandon their traditional agricultural methods.

The colonial establishment of new forms of rapid transport over great distances; namely the railways in the second half of the nineteenth century have been brought many changes. The expansion of the townships, administrative and commercial centre's, attracted many job-seekers and businessmen from rural areas as well as distant parts of the country. (8) With the coming of the modern industrial organization and the growth of industrial cities, large numbers of peoples congregated in cities of mixed

populations, away from the influence of their homes and unobserved by their caste or village people. With the rapid increase of population and decrease of land forced them to engage in different kind of jobs to earn their livelihood.

The population in Cachar marked a gradual increase, since the British occupation of the valley. In 1831 Fisher had estimated the population of the Cachar valley at 50,000. In 1842 Lyon, Superintendent of Cachar reported that the population of the plains had increased to 80,000. And another census was taken in 1851 reported the figure of 85,522. Of them 30,573 were Bengalee Hindu, 29,708 Bengalee Muslim, 10,723 Manipuris, 276 Assamese, 62 Europeans, 6,320 Kukis, 5,645 Nagas and 2,215 Dimachas. (9) In the middle nineteenth century the Naga population of 5,645 was the Rongmei Naga population. The population of the plain portion of Cachar was recorded 38121 in 1834 and 1872 which rose to 205,027 during the Britishers period. (10) In 1881 which was recorded 211, 185 (41.16%) which rose total increase of 84,338 compared to the census of 1872. (11) This show the tremendous increased of population in a few decades. The pre-colonial land system underwent tremendous changes during the British rule in India. The earlier settlers in Cachar plains were almost all peasant. The Cachar had enough fallow land and the population was very thin whereas the neighbouring district of Sylhet was thickly populated district where the land was an extremely scarce commodity. This factor induced the peasants of Sylhet to extend the cultivation and gradually settlement in the reclaimed areas. Thomas Fisher, the first superintendent, raised the revenue for the government by inducing and giving settlement to a large number of immigrants from Sylhet and the neighbouring districts. The tea plantation in Cachar started in 1855 and gradually the British took interest in its expansion on vast commercial line. Extension of British administration and the recognition of territories of areas thus closely followed the colonial consolidation of the region.

To increase the land revenue the British Government invited many non-tribals into the jungle areas. Migration from Sylhet for extending agriculture was encouraged which allowed the Muslim immigrants to settle in Southern parts of Cachar. This gradually weakened the strength of the original settlers. Not only this have the British invited large numbers of Manipuris to settle in the southern part in order to check the Kukis and Lushais raided in southern Cachar. Before the Britishers came to this region the condition of the people remained almost segregated. There was no mixing together with the other country. But later the scenario becomes quite different after the coming of the Britishers and more after Independence. When in the second half of the nineteenth century and during the first decades of the twentieth century the British extended their administrative control over part of the hill regions, they did not encourage the entry of plainsmen, but devised a system of administration which allowed the Hillmen to run their affairs along traditional lines.

#### IV. ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY

The original religion of the tribal population in India is commonly characterized as animistic. The Rongmei embraced Hinduism yet animistic belief and they worshipped different Gods. The animism is the oldest form of supernatural belief and myth was the earliest core of animism and social institution on the life of people playing great role of religious influence. It is the relationship between God and man for many generations. R. Brown in his statistical account of Manipur rightly says that the Rongmei believed in one Supreme Deity whose nature is benevolent. (12) The Kabui recognize also numerous spirits, good or bad, who inhabit certain parts of the hills, chiefly those inaccessible to man, and who require to be propitiated by offerings and sacrifices. (13) The Naga truly believed that the evil spirits could bring any form of ill luck, disease, death of infant, famine, ruin of crop, cattle epidemic etc. Hence the Nagas religious life was filled with numerous rite and sacrifices to please the evil spirits. (14) The role of the priest played important in the olden days because of his magico-sorcery power. The priest performed almost all the sacrifices either for individual or for the village as a whole. The Rongmei people believe in one supreme God called Tingkao Ragwang, who is the creator of the whole universe and human world. They worshipped so that they could be protected from epidemics and other evil spirits. In the earlier days the village priest (Muh) performed all the religious rites and ceremonies. The ancient traditional religion remained intact till the coming of the Christianity and Hinduism in the region.

Coming of Christianity the ancient practice was liberalized. The missionaries aim to convert the native. The Rongmei Naga was very superstitious and religious. The new converts had to face a number of tortures, accusation and opposition from the villages and as well as from their families. They thought that the white missionaries are trying to pollute their people and customs and being ill luck to their people. In the modern world of today gradually many of the Rongmeis those converted to Christianity have given up all animistic rites and rituals and it is replaced by the Christian way. They now no longer observe the traditional

religious sacrifices. They are cut off from their traditional worship and no longer give offerings associated with the traditional village festivals.

Christianity in the society prohibition of offering sacrifice does not observe any formal restriction. Now people cope up with the modern way of life and as they are also have close contact with the other majority society have greatly resulted in change. With the coming of Christianity have discarded their age-old customs and traditions and have embraced a new culture which is totally alien to them. With the advent of the British as the political head of the society were bound to take on a different aspect. The British brought with them their own traditional form of Government, and as Christians they could not have much sympathy with the institutions of the Hindus. (15) In the modern world of today many of the Rongmei those converted to Christianity have given up all animistic rites and rituals and it is replaced by the Christian way. The traditional religion follower still follows the rites and ritual but not very strictly observed like in the olden days. Christianity has contributed new living style in different ways like education, living standard, etc. Christianity had brought about education in their early part of their mission primary school. Before the advent of the Christian Missionaries the Rongmei were cent percent illiterate and there was no written language of their own. Through the sincere efforts of the Christian Missionary the indigenous system of communicating their views through oral communication was replaced by the written form. It also changes with the pattern of the modern world. With the coming of Christianity the people have more or less continuous contact with the outside world. Their way of life has been affected. Many of the youngsters are now pursuing in different educational institutions and levels from primary to technical and professional education both the sexes. The traditional religion does not worship idol but with the blending of the majority group of society predominantly influence by Hinduism, the idol worshipped influences them.

During the 20th century Haipou Jadonnang, the prophet first introduced reformation in their traditional religion. During his last pilgrimage in Bhubon cave in 1931 a new cult was revealed to Haipou Jadonnang and Rani Gaidinliu. After his death Rani Gaidinliu, his disciple organised the new cult and introduced in the Zeliangrong society and it came to be known as Heraka. He worships Tingkao Ragwring through prayer and he abolished irrational taboos and genna. Abolishing of tradition animal sacrifice and with it the restrictions on physical movement did good respond. Due to economic hardship among the Zeliangrong it adopted a new god who no sacrifices. Now the Rongmei society is in process to protect their culture and religion.

## V. CHALLENGES OF SURVIVAL

Having been forced to abandon their traditional habitat and settle themselves in a new area, the Rongmeis encountered a new challenge: the challenge of survival. In their traditional habitat in Manipur they had the security and comfort of a large community who not only provided them the numbers but also the strength. They had land handed over by the previous generation, knowledge and experience of food gathering from the older generation and the security of knowing the surrounding well. They had familiarized the environment fairly well and were by now well equipped to survive. But once they decided to leave that familiar surroundings and settle in a new place, they had lost the advantage of knowledge and familiarity of their old habitat. They were new to Cachar; the surroundings were new, the environment new and the neighbours unfamiliar. They had a strong state – the Dimasa State (Heramba Rajya) to contend with and a huge river- Barak- to negotiate with. Under the situation they were in for a set of completely new challenge to cope with.

Formerly, the forests used to play important role in tribal's economic life, but because of the prohibition of cutting down trees by the government in the forests in their new habitat, it did not provide any support to tribal's economy. Over cultivation of the accessible land results in soil exhaustion to the site and forced to move to another where they may enjoy more prosperous in harvest. Before the annexation by the British, Cachar district revenue was poor. The district was full of jungles, wild animals and few tribes like Kuki, Naga, Lushai and some low caste Bengalis who were living in different parts of Cachar. (16)

In the earlier days, when population was small, forests could be cultivated extensively but now that the demand for cultivable land has increased so out of proportion that the size of holding has become small and fragmented. Due to non-availability of cultivable land within their village territory, as the shifting cultivation has been abandoned; they migrated to different areas and engaged in some other mode of production to meet the subsistence level economic needs of the people. The form of agriculture which was practiced by most of the tribes was primitive and low in yield. However, unlike the other tribes the Rongmei did not develop any commercial contact with the outside communities. They were quite satisfied with what they have

neither did they try to market their products. The primitive type of agriculture is no longer practiced among the Rongmei Naga in the Barak Valley due to non-availability of the cultivable land. The government's persuasion to replace the practice of shifting cultivation by plough cultivation, their earlier system of land ownership is no longer tenable. Earlier the land was owned by the community, clans having the right of its use. Now the land is owned individual. But the situation has changed immensely due to rapid growth of population, demand of land has multiplied and there is, almost, in every community scarcity of cultivable land. It is to be mentioned here that after migration from Manipur to the plains of Cachar and Hailakandi, now the Rongmeis totally gave up their age-old practice of *jhum* cultivation due to non-availability of cultivable land. In present most of the Rongmeis in Barak Valley do not live in jungle but in urban areas.

Besides agriculture and selling forest produce the other major occupation of the Rongmei are fishing and hunting. Although in Barak valley there are a large number of streams, rivers and water bodies, there is also a large population of fisherman community who are fisherman by caste belonging to the Hindu community. They dominate the fish catching business and have demarcated area for fishing. Although the Rongmeis continued catching fish in small quantities for most of their need they depended on the markets where fish caught by fisherman were sold. The collection of jungle produce, fishing and by hunting supplemented their subsistence. When the revenue policy of the colonial decreased due to unplanned and indiscriminate destruction, the forest areas were reserved more and more that led to extreme shortage of forest products like firewood, fruits, timbers etc. This also led tensions and restlessness among the people. The traditional hunting grounds of the villages and population were affected. It does not yield them the important subsistence as it did in the past.

Violation of the rules was severely punished. To extract taxes from the hill people, the government introduced strict fishing and hunting rules. Fishing by dragnets, castnets or by fowling the water by throwing in earth was forbidden in all the hill streams. (17) In 1923, for violating such rules, a Kabui village in Wilong was fined Rs.24 for fishing in the Barak.(18) The economic position was decreasing and found difficult in their domestic way of life. Due to encroachment, on their traditional hunting and fishing rights, the hill people were very grieved.

The last Kachari king Gobin Chandra was assassinated by seditious person on April 24, 1830 at Haritkar. As he left no heir in 1830, Cachar was taken over definitely as an administered district, its first superintendent under Captain Stewart. The British administrators inducted changes in the land system in Cachar by gradually liquidating the khel (19) system by encouraging immigration from the neighbouring districts as part of the colonial policy of revenue maximization, and by declaring the larger portion of the valley as 'waste land' which made it eligible for 'tea grants' under 'waste land rules'.(20) The waste land settlement rules were first framed in Assam in 1838, but these were modified in 1860, 1864, 1875 and 1882 to expand the scope to include the forested, fallow and abandoned land for tea grants.(21) The introduction of new economic policy like house tax in cash, establishment of government rights over forests and fisheries were uprooted the traditional self sufficient economic life of the people.

The pre-colonial land system underwent tremendous changes during the British rule in India. The earlier settlers in Cachar plains were almost all peasant. The Cachar had enough fallow land and the population was very thin whereas the neighbouring district of Sylhet was thickly populated district where the land was an extremely scarce commodity. This factor induced the peasants of Sylhet to extend the cultivation and gradually settlement in the reclaimed areas. Thomas Fisher, the first superintendent, raised the revenue for the government by inducing and giving settlement to a large number of immigrants from Sylhet and the neighbouring districts. The tea plantation in Cachar started in 1855 and gradually the British took interest in its expansion on vast commercial line. Extension of British administration and the recognition of territories of areas thus closely followed the colonial consolidation of the region.

As soon as agricultural populations from outsiders moved into Barak valley, the habit of cultivating their land in rotation became a source of weakness, for fields left fallow with the intention of resuming cultivation after a number of years could easily be occupied by new settlers, who then managed to obtain title deeds for the occupied land. They were no match to the peasants of the plains in efficiency of farming or in holding on to the land. The Rongmei people were lack of knowledge and foresight and by their easy-going habits later on, they fall on the hand of the land hungry competitors deprived the original tribal settlers of their

land. Slowly they are squeezed out of their land holding. The Rongmei claim that in the earlier times, they had occupied a much larger area than they are holding now in the present times. Though there was no record but they have the evident that they lost their land. Due to non-availability of cultivable land within their village territory, they migrated to different areas and engaged in some other mode of production to meet the subsistence level economic needs of the people. This has resulted in a number of problems; dispute over land have increased every year; the annual yield has become scanty and meager; many villagers has left his original village in search of cultivable land; from the hills have even migrated to the plains areas.

After the Partition of India in 1947 the Bengal Hindu & Muslim population was increased manifolds. This tremendous explosion of non-tribal population not only threatened the small demographic strength of the Rongmei people, the pressure on the land resources which forced them to engage in different kind of jobs to earn their livelihood. This has affected the traditional economic life of people adversely. The Rongmei Naga tribe dependence on forests as their primary sources of livelihood since the earliest period however they not only had to give up their agricultural pursuit due to the non-availability of land, they began to be displaced from their traditional habitat. They adopting non-agricultural occupations by gradually increasing the number of people, particularly near the urban areas are another decreasing yield of the practice of shifting cultivation. The encroachment of many outsiders has threatened on the earlier habitats. The process of the gradual displacement forced them to abandon their traditional agricultural methods.

## VI. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGES

In the Indian social context the problem of backwardness has arisen on the account of the defective Hindu social order. The Rongmei came into close contact with majority non-tribal population in Barak valley which is predominantly Hindu and Muslim many centuries back. Though the Rongmei Naga is not a caste based society and no associated evils system like untouchability or social inequality but with the influence of the majority group they are to some extent pushed to the backward class. This change has been clearly brought about by the alterations in the demographic pattern of Rongmei society affected by the unabated influx of Bengali-speaking Hindu and Muslims who, in the course of a few years, seek and gain entry into the Majority fold. The Rongmei have been living with the non-tribal population side by side for centuries. They have friendly relation with the plains people but in this relationship, they always remained losers and suffered in one way or the other. Eating of meat and various other foods ridicule their customs and beliefs and discourage the use of the tribal language. This forces them to observe the social and religious habits in order to avoid lapse that could create among the majority group. Gradually acculturation leads to tribal disintegration. They become a part of Hindu society and they were to be absorbed in the larger Hindu system with the help of the process of sanskritization. As the Rongmei in Barak Valley are minority community and they are to be strongly influenced by Bengali.

As the Rongmei people are in close contact with the non-tribal which has to some extent influenced by the more economically advanced group like Bengali Hindu and Muslim. Though they have learned better way of life but have threatened their tradition socio-economic life tremendously. They have to compete with the more advance group in every walk of life. Tribal society faces problem in the context of Indian society. The small demographic people could not find space to voice their views openly thus led to disparities in civil society in the region. There is first of all the problem of discriminating among related and overlapping modes of tribal organization. There is also problem of drawing clear lines of demarcation between tribal and non-tribal society. The tribal backwardness is often term as 'primitive' as they are considered to be on lower stage of development. After blending with the so called plains people, the Rongmei in Barak valley the houses are built mostly with Assam type houses with bricks. Most of the living condition is also assimilated with the majority population. The acculturation phenomena also can be observed in the field of traditional social cultural system. The culture contacts have greatly resulted in change of habits, dress, way of living etc. Besides these, the influence of environment and proximity led to assimilation of socio-cultural characteristics.

The traditional Rongmei society have self-sufficient independent social unit, the village, headed by the village Headman (Peipow). In those days the village chiefs and the councilors were trusted and they were also dependent upon the people but today the kind of government cannot be implemented as an effective administrative system adequate to modern conditions. The Rongmei follow the Patriarchal system of family which is the head of the family, who holds the absolute power as well the full

responsibilities for protection and looking after the welfare of all dependents of the maintenance of his family. The villagers have in some cases chosen their spouse from outside the village and inter-marriage with the non-tribals also accepted which is not found in the olden days, as the Rongmei of Barak Valley as they are living together with the majority Bengali speaking from the colonial time. The modern developments have brought changes in the traditional form of marriage and the practice was liberalized even if they considered as unnatural and intolerable ones.

The colonial establishment of new forms of rapid transport over great distances; namely the railways in the second half of the nineteenth century have been brought many changes. The expansion of the townships, administrative and commercial centre's, attracted many job-seekers and businessmen from rural areas as well as distant parts of the country. (22) With the rapid increase of population and decrease of land forced them to engage in different kind of jobs to earn their livelihood. In search of employment with the progress of development many Rongmei people entered the state town committee service were given colony known as Kaguiluang, Tarapur Rongmei colony and several settlements were also established near the Silchar area. Many Rongmei from the hills and valleys rural area were settled in different areas of Silchar. They engaged themselves in many other jobs to supplement their income. Majority of the urban settlers depend on employments particularly in Municipality, Railway and Medical mostly in low grade job such as caretaker, peons, sweepers, drivers etc. As reported the Rongmeis did took up the job just because they were paid. It is also reported that it was easily available as the majority population belonging to the Hindu community who were more advanced in terms of education were not willing to take up. The transition of work from traditional economic to the government and non-government sectors has to some extent efforts towards economic development but majority of them are belonging to economically poor. By and large, there has not been much change in the occupational pattern and most of them live a precarious economic existence.

As the Rongmei people are in close contact with the non-tribal which has to some extent influenced by the more economically advanced group like Bengali Hindu and Muslim. Though they have learned better way of life but have threatened their tradition socio-economic life tremendously. They have to compete with the more advance group in every walk of life. Tribal society faces problem in the context of Indian society. There is first of all the problem of discriminating among related and overlapping modes of tribal organization. There is also problem of drawing clear lines of demarcation between tribal and non-tribal society. The tribal backwardness is often term as 'primitive' as they are considered to be on lower stage of development.

The Rongmei people in Barak valley are mostly valley-dwellers and they are in long contact with the Bengali society and culture. Basically Bengali has been serving as the lingua franca among the various ethno-linguistic groups. Regular weekly markets in the neighbourhood of a cluster of Bengali villages were the only forum for getting together and it served as a means of communication. One can find the problem facing minority to acculturate to mainstream culture while maintaining their heritage language. The society is influence with the neighbouring society.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In terms of economic, socio-cultural and political there is need for equal courage to deal with the challenges faced by the small demographic groups, which can repair the inequality feeling among the society. The Rongmei people were lack of knowledge and foresight and by their easy-going habits later on, they fall on the hand of the land hungry competitors deprived the original tribal settlers of their land. Slowly they are squeezed out of their land holding. The Rongmei claim that in the earlier times, they had occupied a much larger area than they are holding now in the present times. Though there was no record but they have the evident that they lost their land. Due to non-availability of cultivable land within their village territory, they migrated to different areas and engaged in some other mode of production to meet the subsistence level economic needs of the people. The changes in the social norm and practices, cultural and age-old practices have manifested large-scale changes. Their age-old traditional agriculture, primitive hunting, gathering and fishing as means of subsistence livelihood have diminish as a result their economic production methods are widely resort to great extent. The new agricultural methods and practices are being resorted to by the valley dwelling tribesmen of Assam. Land holding system has undergone changes from the community and lineages.

The acculturation phenomena also can be observed in the field of traditional social cultural system. The culture contacts have greatly resulted in change of habits, way of living, etc. Besides these, the influence of environment and proximity led to assimilation of socio-cultural characteristics. The traditional religion does not worship idol but with the blending of the majority group of society predominantly influence by Hinduism, the idol worshipped influences them. Bengali remains as the lingua franca of the area. The impact of modernization and Christianity has broken the traditional social relationship in the village.

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