

Political encounter between the British and the Singpho tribe of Arunachal Pradesh: A brief study from 1792 to 1829 AD

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Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh is the largest state among the eight states of the North East India. It is a home for twenty six (26) major tribes and numbers of sub-tribes who speak their own distinct languages and maintained an identical cultural institutions and practices. Due to distinct cultural identities and language variation among the tribes the state is endowed with affluent cultural mosaic and indigenous institutions.

The present paper provides an overview of the political relationship between Singpho tribe of Arunachal Pradesh and the British. Before the establishment of British authority in Assam the Singpho tribe was having commercial relation with the Ahom. In the year 1792 AD Ahom King Gaurinath Singha sought assistance from the British to suppress the rebels. In the Moamaria rebellion the Singpho tribe was fighting with the rebels against the Ahom power. The tribe stands against the British when the later came to assist the Ahom ruler, Gaurinath Singha. Hence, one could observe that the Singpho tribe stands against the British power since the very beginning of their political encounter.

The tribe practiced barter system in their daily economic transactions. However, their tribal economy was totally transformed after the tribe came into contact with the British. After the discovery of tea bushes in 1823 in Singpho area the British understood the economic and strategic importance of the Singpho homesteads. After the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 the British began to implement slave abolition policy in Singpho homesteads. This had severe effects in their traditional chieftainship system. The slave abolition policy became the bone of contention for the Singpho and British throughout their relation.

As it was the beginning of the relegation of the traditional Singpho political and legal system. Many Singpho chiefs have tried to revolt against the British new policies but they were badly suppressed. Thus, the Singpho tribe has undergone a vast change in their political system after they came into direct contact with the British power. The British policies have relegated traditional Singpho political and legal institution by imposing new administrative system.

Keywords: *Ahom, barter, Moamaria, Chieftainship, Yandaboo, Gaurinath Singha.*

Introduction

The Singpho tribe is one of the major tribe of the state. They have rich history, culture institutions and traditional practices. The Singpho are found in the Yunnan Province of China, the Chengmai Province of Thailand and the Kachin state of Myanmar. The same tribe is known by different name in different countries. In China the tribe is known as the Jinpho, in Thailand they are known as the Jinphaw and in India they are known as the Singpho. In India the tribe is found in Arunachal Pradesh and in Assam. In the present paper the researcher has focused on the Singpho living in Arunachal Pradesh. In Arunachal Pradesh the tribe is found in Changlang, Lohit and Namsai Distircts. The major concentration of the Singpho population is found in the Bordumsa Administrative Circle of the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh. The empirical data used in the present paper had been collected from Bordumsa area. The Singpho inhabiting in Arunachal Pradesh follow Theravada Buddhism. Besides Buddhism the people also practice an indigenous belief system known as *Nhat Gun* means worshipping of the spirits. However, the

later is in a relegated form since the people adopted and prefer the Buddhist way of living. The major festival of the Singpho tribe is Shapawng Yawng Manau Poi.

British-Singpho political relation

The East India Company was a trade organization and its primary concern was commerce and trade. In order to promote its mercantile objectives the East India Company would be readily utilized any opportunity.¹ In the year 1792 AD the Ahom king Gaurinath Singha provided the Company that opportunity by requesting assistance from the British East India Company. The Ahom king was unable to suppress the Moamaria rebellion so he requested for the British authority to assist him to suppress the Moamaria rebellion. Thus, the British got an opportunity to interfere in the internal matter of Ahom and have got a valid excuse to enter into Assam. After accepting the appeal of Gaurinath Singha the British immediately dispatched Captain Thomas Welsh expedition to Assam in September 1792. This expedition is popularly known as the Captain Welsh Expedition of 1792 in the history of Assam. This expedition proved to be a huge success as the British could suppressed the rebels and have re-established Gaurinath Singha on the throne of Ahom monarchy of Assam.

Apart from military engagements, captain Welsh expedition proved to be very fruitful from commercial perspective for the British authority. Captain Thomas Welsh had explored the commercial prospects of Assam and found out that the region had a good market for salt and opium. Thus, he signed a commercial treaty with the Ahom ruler Gaurinath Singha on February 28, 1793 before he return to Kolkata (Calcutta). Thus Assam virtually comes under the British administration which was going to affect all the neighboring tribes of Ahom including the Singpho tribe. After the famous Captain Welsh expedition the British administration appointed Francis Hamilton in 1810 to prepare a ground report on Assam. Francis Hamilton's report was the earliest British records in which the Singpho tribe had been mentioned in these lines;

*"South from the Abor or Khamti, as I have said, is a country called Chingpho, which has a Raja independent of Assam, but with those people there is some commercial intercourse."*²

Although he mistakenly spelled Singpho as Chingpho and that too as territory not as a tribe but the geographical location which he mentioned was the Singpho inhabited area. Therefore, one can found that since the first decade of 19th century the Singpho are mentioned in the British records. However, till the discovery of the tea bushes in the year 1823 the Singpho tribe did not have direct contact with the British. The tea plants were discovered in Singpho homestead which brought them to direct contact with the British. The Committee of Tea culture reported about the discovery of tea bushes in the Singpho areas:

*"The tea shrub is beyond all doubt indigenous in Upper Assam, being found there through extent of country of one month's march within the Honorable Company's territories, from Sadiya and Beesa, to the Chinese frontier province of Yunnan, where the shrub is cultivated for the sake of its leaf."*³

The Singpho tribe began to have some loose political relations with the British since the Moamria rebellion. The Singpho were fighting with the Moamaria rebels against the Ahom power thus it automatically brought them against the British who had come to Assam to assist the Ahom king Gaurinath Singha. The discovery of tea bushes in the Singpho homestead brought the tribe in direct contact with the British, consequently their loose political relation had transformed into commercial relation. The Singpho chief Beesa Gam was credited to be the person who introduced tea bushes to the British officer Robert Bruce and told him that the tea plant grew wild in their homestead.⁴ In a very short span of time the tea estate business emerged as a huge success. Thus the British realized the commercial importance of the tribe. Apart from commercial importance the British realized that the Singpho homestead was situated in between

Assam and Myanmar thus providing the tribe a strategic importance. This facilitated establishing of a friendly atmosphere between the Singpho and the British administration in the course of time.

However, the relation between the Singpho and the East India Company became bitter again after a short period. The Singpho suddenly joined with the Myanmarese force who again invaded Assam in the month of May in 1825 to re-conquer the state.⁵ In this Myanmarese invasion Singpho tribe joined with them therefore the later also raided the plains of Assam and had carried away large numbers of Assamese native. Later on, these captives were made their slaves in their homesteads which W.S. Clarke observed and wrote that; 'The slaves possessed by the Singphos are the offspring of the captives and slaves either Naga or Assamese'.⁶ In this occurrence, once again the Ahom king sought assistance from the British in order to suppress the invading Myanmarese force.

Like in the Moamaria Rebellion in this military encounter also the British made alliance with the Myanmarese troop against the Ahom authority. Thus, this time also the Singpho was again in the opposite of the British. This might be the reason why the British branded the Singpho tribe as warlike tribe. This could be substantiated by the words of John M' Cosh; 'by far the most powerful and the most formidable of these hill tribes are the Singpho'.⁷ Allied troop of the Myanmarese and the Singpho made their advancement with destruction which had been responded by Captain John Bryan Neufville by commanding the 57th Native Infantry marched up to Noa Dihing. After a series of fighting, the British troop had destroyed two Singpho villages namely Bisa and Duffa.⁸ Finally Captain Neufville defeated the allied troop of Singpho and Myanmarese. While destroying the Singpho villages the British had also successfully freed 3000 Assamese captives from their Singpho masters.⁹ The British rigorously implemented the slave abolition policy in Singpho homestead which later on became the major bone of contention between the Singpho and the British.

From the time of Moamaria rebellion the Singpho and the British began to have a loose political relation. During the Momaria rebellion the Singpho supported the rebellions whereas the British supported the Ahom. Again in the year 1825 during the Myanmarese invasion of Assam again the Singpho were supporting the Myanmarese troop whereas the British were supporting the Ahom power. In both the political turmoil the Singpho and the British were supporting two fighting powers. However, they were not having direct political relation and did not confront each other directly in both the occurrence.

However, after the allied power of Myanmarese and Singpho troop was defeated the British had direct political encounter with the Singpho tribe especially while implementing the slave abolition policy in the Singpho homestead. Many Singpho chiefs revolt against the slave abolition policy however the British suppressed all the revolts ruthlessly. Apart from the planning to release the captives, Captain Neufville planned to make Singpho chiefs to surrender before the British administration. The initial military operation resulted in the surrender of Beesa Gam and other chiefs in September 1825 and the Myanmarese was forced to sign a peace treaty with the British.¹⁰ As a result the treaty of Yandaboo was signed on February 24, 1826 by which the Myanmarese was cleared out of Assam for good.¹¹ After expelling the Myanmarese the British immediately directed their attention towards the Singpho and got involved in war with them for some time.¹²

After signing the peace treaty of Yandaboo with the Myanmarese the British signed a peace treaty with some of the Singpho chiefs on May 3, 1826. Again in June 1826 another peace treaty was signed with sixteen (16) Singpho chiefs out of twenty eight (28) chiefs who came into agreement with David Scott the

then Agent of Governor General on North East India.¹³ The chiefs who have entered into peace treaty with the British agreed to release the captives from their villages and promised to assist the British troops whenever required in near future. After the agreements these chiefs were to consider themselves as British subjects but they were not to pay tribute to the British.¹⁴

As the Singpho traditional chieftainship system was based on oligarchic political structure thus all the chiefs were independent of one another. Therefore, though after the sixteen Singpho chiefs have signed peace treaty or an agreement with David Scott, the other remaining chiefs were still hostile to the British. Traditionally the chiefs have political independence since early days so no single chief can force other chiefs to sign the agreement with the British. After the British direct encounter with the Singpho they made some Singpho chiefs sign an agreement with the British administration. However, few Singpho chiefs still have not signed the agreement thus the Singpho chieftainship was divided into two groups. 'The Singpho were divided into two parties, one attached to the Burmese invaders, the other neutral and willing to make peace.'¹⁵ As such one of the hostile chief named Wakun Khoonjun from Ava in Myanmar in 1829 formed an alliance with other hostile border tribes and led a revolt against the British.

Wakun Khoonjun was a Singpho chief who was among the hostile chief, led this rebellious allied group. They raised stockades and made their military preparation at the village called Luttora. This time they aimed to destroy the British stockades located at Sadiya in Assam and to put up a strong resistance to any advance of the British troops. But in this military encounter the Singpho troop led by Wakun Khoonjun was utterly defeated by the British troop led by Captain Neufville. Though the Singpho troop was badly defeated they were not ready to accept British domination and continue to revolt against the British. However, the Singpho troop were badly crippled thus they could not continue their resistance widely and effectively. Though they continue to exhibit their hostility to British rule but were being suppressed by the British military troops.

This Singpho revolt of 1829 was the last widely organized uprising against the British by the Singpho chiefs. As the Singpho chiefs continue to resist accepting British rule thus British-Singpho relation became bitter. The military encounter became worst as the British authority began to adopt harsh policy by displaying a force to suppress the rebellious Singpho chiefs. On this suppression action, numbers of Singpho leaders were incarcerated and some of them were even hanged. Some Singpho chiefs were sentence to transportation for whole life. For instance, Bom Singpho was a rebellious leader who was given transportation for life. Another rebellious Singpho leader Ningru Thumngo was banished to Kolkata (Calcutta) where he was hanged.¹⁶ The Singpho-British loose political relation which started from Moamaria Rebellion in the year 1792 was transformed into commercial relation after the discovery of tea plant in Singpho area in the year 1823 AD. Then again the commercial relationship was converted into direct political relation after the Myanmarese was ousted from Assam in the year 1826 AD. This resulted in a short but very affective military encounter between the Singpho and the British.

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