

# **A Sociological View on *Dong* of Biate Society**

Timothy L. Singson\* and A.K.Nongkynrih\*\*

## **Abstract**

*Social scientists in India have been writing on family or households in India. However, the same cannot be said in the context of North-East India. This paper focuses on households in tribal communities and focuses on the households of the Biate tribe, known as dong, its meanings and role. Both primary and secondary data was used in the paper. It can be said that dong is a physical and social entity. As a social entity it can be called a patriarchal household, an inclusive unit, a socialising unit, a corporate, property-owning group, and also a place of decision-making concerning the life-cycle of members.*

## **Introduction**

In social science research, family or household in India has received substantive focus and attention. However, writings on family or household in tribal societies of India have been limited. In this paper, the household as a concept is used and applied in the discussion and the empirical observation was drawn from a tribal society called Biate. On the issue of selecting household as the concept, one would agree with the statement in the Dictionary of Sociology, 'For many purposes of sociological analysis this is a term preferable to the more widely used family' (Abercrombie et al 1984: 201). The reason for selecting household as a working definition was to take into cognizance the variations of composition of members in households. In the context of Biate society, the place where one lives or resides is referred to as *dong*, and *dong* can be equated to household. The objective of this paper is to

examine the meaning and role of *dong* in the Biате tribe. Both primary and secondary data was used in the paper; and primary data was collected from 112 households of Mualsei village in Meghalaya during the period 2011-2012.

The Biате population is distributed in different parts of North East India and their major concentration is in the states of Assam and Meghalaya. The Biате people in Meghalaya inhabit the southeastern portion of the East Jaintia Hills District; and are also referred as *Hadem* in Meghalaya. Mualsei village is one of the biggest Biате villages in Meghalaya and is located in the interior part of the Jaintia hills. To reach Mualsei village one has to take a 75 km long distance bus ride from Jowai in Meghalaya till Umrangshu in Assam; from Umrangshu to Khobak village in an auto-rickshaw for three hours or more; and from Khobak on foot for four hours to reach Maulsei.

Maulsei village was established in the year 1921 and the early settlers comprised of both Christians and those of the indigenous faith. At present all the villagers profess the Christian faith. Mualsei village falls under the Saipung Community and Rural Development Block of East Jaintia Hills district in Meghalaya; and it falls under the area covered by the Saipung Reserved forest. Saipung Reserved forest is the biggest Reserved Forest in Meghalaya covering an area of 150.35 sq. km. Land is available in the village and agro-forest kind of activities provide livelihood for the people. The water source of the village is a spring located at a higher altitude about 2 km from the village. The water is channeled through water pipes to two tanks located in the middle and west-end of the village. The water is used for drinking, washing clothes and all other domestic purposes by the villagers.

The total population of the village living in these 112 households was 806 persons. There were 385 (47.76 percent) males and 421 (52.23 percent) females out of the total of 806 persons in the village. In the village there is a Knitting and Training Centre providing vocational training courses. There were some places set aside for public use in the village such as the playground, cemetery and an open ground in the middle of the village used for organising festivals and community feast. The village does not have electricity connection. The nearest weekly markets are located in the villages of Lungmaicham and Khobak in Assam, at a distance of about five hours' and four hours' walk

respectively from Mualsei village. The village has its own traditional political institution which has its own role and responsibilities in the social life of Biate people.

### **Understanding Household**

What is a household? According to Mayer (1986) , ‘households refers to those people who share a cooking hearth, pool their incomes and have their living expenses in common’ (p. 177); and Bohannan (1963) further elaborated that households, ‘ may or may not constitute a family, and if they do, it may or may not be a simple nuclear family’ (p. 86). According to Singh (2003), household ‘is a generic term that refers to all sorts of families, though all households cannot be classified as family. A household may consist of only one person or a group of unrelated persons, but a family primarily consists of more than one person united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption’ (p. 56).

On the same subject matter, Shah (1973) holds that the household is one of the several dimensions of the family and should be viewed in relation to the other dimensions. Shah defines a household as

...a residential and domestic unit composed of one or more persons living under the same roof and eating cooked food in a single kitchen’. In his study of the village of Radhvanaj, Shah classifies the households into two major categories based on their kinship composition as ‘simple’ and ‘complex’. A simple household may be composed of the whole or a part of a parental family and there are six major possible compositions. On the other hand, complex household may be composed of more than ‘one parental family, or of parts of more than one parental family, or of one or more than one parental families and parts of one or more other parental families (p. 8).

Shah (1973) further states that the developmental process of the household moves in progression and regression. The developmental process is dependent not only on the demographic factors of birth, marriage, and death but also on the norms of residence and the degree of observance of the norms.

According to Nongkynrih (2002), the smallest and the basic unit in the Khasi society is the *iing* which can be viewed as a domestic group of three or four generations consisting of male and female consanguines and may or may not have husbands in any generation residing with their

wives and children; and it may also include married brothers living with their sisters but without their wives and children. The *iing* acts as a socialising unit, political unit, economic unit and a ritual-performing unit, and also functions as a corporate group where the division of labour among the members is based upon their age. In his study of the village of Kongthong, he found a variety of structures of household relations and it varies from the single-member simple type to multi-member complex type households.

Das (1945) observes that the smallest unit in the Purum society is the biological family consisting of a man, his wife and the unmarried children born of their union. He found that almost all Purum families are nuclear families and it is rare to find a joint family consisting of the parents and one or more married sons with their wives and children. The Purum society is patrilineal and patriarchal. The father is the head of the family and has absolute control over the family property. The father represents the family in matters relating to social, religious and political affairs and also officiates as priest in some of the religious rites. Das states that a Purum family is also an economic unit where all the members unite under the leadership of the head of the family in all economic activities for producing food for the family. The family also acts as a religious unit and all the religious rites connected with agricultural activities are performed by the family. Das notes that among the Purum a household corresponds with a family as they do not keep servants and dependents such as sister's sons or daughters are rare, and the only outsider who lives in a Purum family is the prospective son-in-law who also leaves after a certain period.

Taking into account the discussion on household, it can be pointed out that household is one of the several dimensions of family and that household is not equivalent to family. Secondly, the meaning of household is the aggregate of persons living together under one roof and sharing a common hearth and may or may not be related to each other by descent or marriage.

### ***Dông* as a Household**

The Biате society is a patrilineal society, and two or more persons are kins of each other if either one of them is descended from the other (father and child relationship) or both of them have descended from a

common ancestor. The patrilineal social arrangement of the society is in terms of *nam*, which is equivalent to clan. All the members of a *nam* are believed to be descended from a common ancestor and are related agnatically, thereby forming a unilineal body of kindred. *Nam* provides the basis of identity of an individual in the Biare society, and at the lowest level of the social arrangement of kinship relations is the *dông*.

*Dông* or household is the smallest unit of social organisation in the Biare society. *Dông* is generally a household of two or three generations consisting of both (males and females) consanguines and affines. The father is the head of the household and he is called *dông pu*. The father is referred to as *thuneitak* (one possessing the highest authority) in relation to the members of the household. The father holds the highest authority in the household and his decision is final except in the marriages of his children where he has to take the permission of his parents-in-law. He is concerned with the overall welfare and maintenance of the household. He presides over the household council or *dông risôn* and represents the household in all matters. The mother raises the children, looks after house-keeping and engages in agricultural activities.

When the father dies, the eldest son living in the household takes charge as the head until he sets up his independent household and moves out. Then the next eldest son succeeds him as the head and so on. However, after the death of the father, the title of *dông pu* is inherited by the youngest son (*ithlum*) and he does not move out of the household. If the children are still young, the mother takes charge as the head of the household till such time as when the children attain adulthood and take up the responsibility of maintaining the household.

It is a customary practice for the elder sons to move out of their father's *dông* after marriage to set up an independent *dông* of their own along with their wives and children. This is known as *dông itum*. The youngest son (*ithlum*), however, does not move out and continues to live in his father's *dông* even after his marriage as it is a customary obligation for the youngest son to live in his father's *dông*. In the next generation, his elder sons also move out after marriage and only the youngest son continues to stay like him in the father's *dông*. Thereby, the primary *dông* is caused to continue through the youngest sons in every generation and such a *dông* is called the *inpui*. The *inpui* signifies the unity of the lineage. Over a number of generations, the *dông* set up

by an elder son also becomes *inpui* for the branch of the lineage perpetuated by him.

Some of the dimensions of household seem to provide an understanding of the patriarchal aspect and the arrangement of authority in society. In a real sense, men assume the position of the head of the household and wield authority; and women deal with domestic affairs, particularly caring for the young. However, in this kind of patriarchal arrangement, authority is not shared among men but from the father to the eldest son. The eldest son assumes this authority if he resides in the household of his father. Secondly, because of the customary practice of patri-ultimogeniture, the father's household is inherited by youngest son including his authority. On the other hand, the elder sons, moving out of their father's household after marriage, set up their own independent households. Thus, under this kind of patriarchal kinship structure, households undergo the process of fusion and fission in every generation, and Fortes (1958) called this as 'the developmental cycle' of domestic groups (households).

**Generational Model of *Dông***

*Dông* in Mualsei has been observed as: (i) a generational model, (ii) simple or complex households, and (iii) a functional unit. The majority of the *dông* in the village were two-generation and three-generation units. There were 58 *dông* (51.78 percent) with two generations living together and 49 *dông* (43.75 percent) with three generations living together. There were also 2 *dông* (1.78 percent) with four generations living together. The number of single generation *dông* was only 3 (2.67 percent) (see Table 1).

**Table – 1**  
*Number of generations living in a household*

No. of generations	Frequency	Percentage
Single generation	3	2.67
Two generations	58	51.78
Three generations	49	43.75
Four generations	2	1.78
Total	112	99.98

**Simple Household**

According to Shah (1973), a simple household may consist of either the whole or a part of the parental family. He identified six major possible compositions of a simple household: (i) husband, wife and unmarried children, (ii) husband and wife, (iii) father and unmarried children, (iv) mother and unmarried children, (v) unmarried brothers and sisters, and (vi) a single man or woman. Table 2 depicts the number of simple type households in the village i.e. 50 (44.64 percent) households.

**Table – 2**  
*Distribution of types of households composition*

Types	Frequency	Percentage
Simple household	50	44.64
Complex household	62	55.35
Total	112	99.99

Out of the 50 *dông* classified as simple households, there were 3 *dông* (6.00%) which were single member households (see Table 4). In the first case of the single member household, an old widower lives alone as his married sons have settled in other villages and he was insistent on staying in Mualsei despite his sons’ repeated request to go and to stay with them. In the second case, a young man lives alone as his parents have died and his only brother works in Jowai town and has settled there. In the third case, a woman, who is a government employee, from a neighbouring village was staying alone as she was posted in the village. She works in the Knitting Training Centre which is run by the District Commerce and Industries Centre, Jaintia Hills District of the Government of Meghalaya. Table 5 depicts the variations of composition of members in a many member simple household.

**Table - 3**  
*Composition of simple households*

Composition	Frequency	Percentage
Single member	3	6.00
Many members	47	94.00
Total	50	100.00

**Table - 4**  
*Composition of single-member simple households*

Composition	Frequency	Percentage
Male	2	66.66
Female	1	33.33
Total	3	99.99

**Table - 5**  
*Composition of many-member simple households*

Composition	Frequency	Percentage
Husband + wife + unmarried children	39	82.97
Father + unmarried children	1	2.12
Mother + unmarried children	5	10.63
Husband + wife	1	2.12
Unmarried brothers + unmarried sister	1	2.12
Total	47	99.96

### **Complex Household**

Shah (1973) defines the complex household as, “...those composed of more than one parental family, or of parts of more than one parental family, or of one or more parental family, or of one or more parental families and parts of one or more other parental families (p. 14).”

In Mualsei, 62 out of the 112 *dông* (55.35 percent) could be classified as complex households. These complex households consisted of 11 *dông* (17.74 percent of the 62 *dông*) as two-generation units, 49 *dông* (79.03 percent of the 62 *dông*) as three-generation units and 2 *dông* (3.22 percent of the 62 *dông*) as a four-generation unit (see Table 6).

**Table - 6**  
*Number of generations living in a complex household*

No. of generations	Frequency	Percentage
Two generations	11	17.74
Three generations	49	79.03
Four generations	2	3.22
Total	62	99.99

Many of the complex households conform to Shah’s categorisation of complex household as ‘atypical’ household. For Shah (1973) ‘atypical’



households are those which develop beyond the conventional growth. In other words, they represent the limits within which the developmental process of most of the households is confined. We shall therefore divide the complex households of Mualsei in two groups: (i) atypical households (see table 7) and (ii) the other type of complex household which does not fall under atypical household (see table 8). The extent to which a household normally and conventionally grows will therefore be classified as those households which do not fall under atypical household category.

**Table - 7**  
*Atypical complex households*

	Composition	Frequency
i	Husband + wife + unmarried children + *unmarried sister's daughter	2
ii	Widowed woman + unmarried daughter + *unmarried daughter's daughter	1
iii	Husband + wife + unmarried children + married son + son's wife + son's children + *unmarried daughter's daughter	3
iv	Husband + wife + unmarried children + *unmarried daughter's children	3
v	Husband + wife + unmarried children + *unmarried daughter's son	1
vi	Husband + wife + unmarried children + *unmarried daughter's daughter	1
vii	Husband + wife + brother's daughter's daughter	1
viii	Husband + wife + unmarried children + married son + son's wife + son's daughter + brother's orphaned daughter + unmarried brother	1
ix	Husband + wife + unmarried children + married daughter + daughter's son + wife's brother's son's daughter	1
x	Husband + wife + married son + son's wife + son's daughter + father's brother's son's daughter	1
xi	Husband + wife + unmarried children + brother's daughter + wife's father's brother's son's daughter	1
xii	Husband + wife + unmarried children + married son + son's wife + son's daughter + brother's son	1
xiii	Husband + wife + married son + son's wife + son's children + son's widowed wife + son's widowed wife's children + dead son's daughter	1
xiv	Husband + wife + unmarried son + unmarried sister	1
xv	Husband + wife + unmarried son + widowed son + son's children	1

xvi	Widowed man + wife's mother + unmarried children + married son + son's widowed wife	1
xvii	Husband + wife + unmarried children + married daughter + daughter's husband	1
xviii	Husband + wife + married daughter + daughter's husband	1
xix	Husband + wife + married daughter + daughter's husband + daughter's children	1
xx	Husband + wife + married daughter + daughter's husband + daughter's children + divorcee sister	1
xvi	Husband + wife + unmarried children + married daughter + daughter's husband + daughter's daughter + wife's father	1
xvii	Husband + wife + unmarried son + brother's married daughter + brother's daughter's husband + brother's daughter's daughter	1
xviii	Husband + wife + unmarried daughters + married daughters + daughters' husbands + daughter's son	1
xiv	Husband + wife + unmarried son + married son + son's wife + son's children + married daughter + daughter's husband + daughter's daughter	1
xxv	Husband + wife + married son + son's wife + son's children + married daughter + daughter's husband + daughter's children + kin	1
xxvi	Widowed man + unmarried children + married daughter + daughter's husband + daughter's children	1

*\*It refers to an illegitimate child. An illegitimate child is called zâinai in the Biata society.*

In household type (i) we found 2 two-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife and the husband's unmarried sister's daughter. The sister's daughter was born out-of-wedlock. The sister got married to a different man and left her daughter in her brother's household. An illegitimate child is called *zâinai* and a *zâinai* is integrated into the mother's *nam* since the child is not accepted or abandoned by the father. In household type (ii) we found 1 two-generation *dông* composed of a widowed woman, her unmarried daughter and her unmarried daughter's daughter. The mother of the *zâinai* got married and left her daughter (*zâinai*) in her mother's care. In the household type (iv) to (vi) we found 8 three-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife, unmarried children (in one case married son, son's wife and son's children also) and unmarried daughter's children. In contrast to the type of household described earlier the mother of the *zâinai* was living in the household,

but there is the possibility of them getting married in the future and leaving the child in her father's household.

In household type (vii) we found a two-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife and the husband's brother's daughter's daughter. The couple was childless and so they informally adopted the husband's brother's daughter's daughter. They have been taking care of her since a very young age. The couple is intending to formally adopt her in the near future. In household type (viii) we found a three-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife, their unmarried children, their married son, married son's wife, married son's daughter, husband's orphaned daughter and husband's unmarried elder brother. The husband and wife had taken the responsibility of fostering the husband's brother's orphaned daughter after both her parents had died. The elder brother of the husband has remained a bachelor though he is eligible for marriage.

In household type (ix) we found 1 three-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife, their unmarried sons, their married daughter, their married daughter's son and the wife's brother's son's daughter. The married daughter and her son stayed in her father's house as she was an employee of the Primary Health Care (PHC) in the village. Her husband is from a different village and visits them occasionally. The wife's brother's son's daughter is also from a different village. She stayed in the household to pursue her studies in the village school. In household type (x) we found 1 three-generation household composed of the husband, the wife, their married son, their married son's wife, their married son's daughter and the husband's father's brother's son's daughter. The husband's father's brother's son's daughter stayed with them to pursue her studies in the village school. In household type (xi) we found 1 three-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife, their unmarried children, the husband's brother's daughter and wife's father's brother's son's daughter. The husband's brother's daughter was working as a teacher in the village school. Her parents are from the same village but they have settled in Jowai. The wife's father's brother's son's daughter was from a different village that stayed in the household to pursue her studies in the village school.

In household type (xii), we found a three-generation household composed of the husband, the wife, their unmarried children, their married son, their married son's wife, their married son's daughter and

the husband's brother's daughter. The husband's brother's son is from a different village that stayed with them to pursue his studies in the village school. In household type (xiii) we found 1 three-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife, their married son, their married son's wife, their son's widowed wife, son's widowed wife children and dead son's daughter. The youngest son died and his wife remarried leaving behind the only daughter. In household type (xiv) we found 1 two-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife, their unmarried son and husband's sister. In household type (xv) we found 1 three-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife, their widowed son and their widowed son's children. In household type (xvi) we found 1 four-generation *dông* composed of a widowed man, his married son, his married son's wife and his wife's mother. The wife's mother came to stay in the *dông* after her husband and both sons had died.

In the remaining 10 *dông*, we found the married daughter, her husband and their children staying in the household. This is in accordance to the customary practice whereby after marriage the husband stays in the wife's house for a period of three to seven years (matrilocal residence). This period is known as *mâksin*. This will be described in detail later in the chapter. Out of these 10 *dông*, 1 two-generation *dông* was composed of the husband, the wife, their married daughter and their married daughter's husband. The next *dông* also had the same composition but with the addition of the unmarried children. In the third case, we found 1 three-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife, their married daughter, their married daughter's husband, their married daughter's children. The next *dông* also has the same composition with an additional member, i.e., the husband's elder divorcee sister. The husband's sister came to live in her brother's house after her divorce. 1 four-generation *dông* was composed of the husband, the wife, their unmarried children, their married daughter, their daughter's husband, their daughter's daughter, and the wife's father. The wife's father was taken in by the household out of sympathy after his son had died and he was subjected to ill-treatment by his daughter-in-law and grandsons. Another three-generation *dông* was composed of the husband, the wife, their unmarried son, husband's married daughter, husband's brother's daughter's husband, husband's brother's daughter's daughter. The husband's brother's daughter was informally adopted by the couple

as they did not have any daughter and also the husband's brother's household was in abject poverty. So she got married in this household and all the customary rules were observed in this household.

In the next three-generation *dông* we found the husband, the wife, their unmarried daughters, two married daughters with their children and one married daughter's son. The other married daughter was newly married and did not have any children yet. The next household was also a three-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife, their unmarried son, their married son, their married son's children, their married daughter, their married daughter's husband and their married daughter's daughter. In the next household type, we found 1 three-generation *dông* composed of the husband, the wife, their married son, their married son's wife, their married son's wife, their married son's daughter, their married daughter, their married daughter's husband, their married daughter's children and a distant kin. The distant kin was an unmarried male from a different village. He belongs to the same *nam* as the husband. He was working as a teacher in the village school. The last household was a three-generation *dông* composed of a widowed man, his unmarried children, his married daughter, his married daughter's husband and his married daughter's children.

**Table - 8**

*Complex households not fall under the category of atypical household*

Composition	Frequency
Husband + wife + married son + son's wife + son's children	7
Husband + wife + unmarried children + married son + son's wife + son's children	6
Husband + wife + unmarried children + married sons + son's wives + sons' children	1
Husband + wife + unmarried children + widowed mother	8
Husband + wife + unmarried children + unmarried brothers + unmarried sisters + widowed mother	4
Husband + wife + unmarried children + unmarried brothers + unmarried sisters	3
Husband + wife + unmarried son + unmarried sister	1
Widowed man + unmarried children + married son + son's wife + son's children	1
Total	31

In the complex households which are not 'atypical', all the two-generation *dông* were composed of the husband, the wife, their children and the husband's unmarried siblings. Only one *dông* has one unmarried son and one husband's unmarried sister. The other 4 *dông* has more than one unmarried children and both husband's unmarried brothers and sisters. In the three-generation *dông* we have 14 *dông* composed of the husband, the wife, their married son, married son's wife and married son's children. In addition to this, there were unmarried children in 7 *dông* and in 1 *dông* there were two married sons with their wives and children. In the other 12 three-generation *dông* we found the husband, the wife, their unmarried children and the husband's widowed mother. Among these 12 three-generation *dông*, 4 *dông* also had the husband's unmarried brothers and unmarried sisters. There was 1 three-generation *dông* composed of a widowed, his unmarried children, his eldest married son, his married son's wife and his married son's children.

From the above tables of the households, we find that in Mualsei we have households with single-member simple type households to multi-member complex type households. In other words, we can say that from a household with no relationship within (single-member households) through one relationship (two-member simple households) between husband and a wife to multiple relationships (multi-member complex households) are found in Mualsei. It is also clear that in Mualsei the majority of the households were of three-generations of kins living together.

The household undergoes a developmental process of both progression and regression due to demographic factor. The household expands with the marriage of the daughters and the entry of the husband for the *mâksin* (it refers to the customary practice of the husband living in the wife's residence after the marriage for a period of three years), thereby introducing new sets of relationships. The household further expands with the birth of children to the daughters, further expanding the sets of relationships. The household experiences regression with the marriage of the sons who move out to their wives' *dông* for *mâksin*. The household further experiences regression with the daughters and her children, after the *mâksin* period, moving out to the households of their husbands. The household again progresses when the sons move to the father's household with their wives and children after the *mâksin* period

is over. Then the household experiences its final regression when the elder sons move out to their independent households. Death is another factor of regression in the household.

In Mualsei we found three modes of residence practised by the sons after marriage. Elder sons move to their wives' *dông* for a period of three years which is known as *mâksin*. After the *mâksin* period is over they continue to live for a few years in the father's *dông* and then set up their own independent *dông*. It was customary for the elder sons to move out of the father's *dông* after marriage. The setting up of an independent household and separation from the father's *dông* by the elder sons after marriage is called *dông itum*. The youngest son (*ithlum*), however, does not leave the father's *dông* even after marriage. In the village those elder sons who were living after marriage with their parents were those in the process of setting up their independent *dông*.

In the village we found that the elder brothers stayed in the father's *dông* for a period of four to ten years after marriage before moving out to their independent households. There was no specified period as to how long the elder sons could stay in the father's *dông* after marriage. However, the majority of them stayed for a short period only. One reason for the early fission of the household was the factor of over-population in the household. In the village most of the houses were small in size and did not have enough space to provide privacy for the household members. Another factor responsible for the early fission of the household was conflict in relationship between members in the household. Tension may arise between unmarried daughters and the daughter-in-law or between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law or between daughters-in-law or sometimes between the brothers.

According to the norms of the society, any unmarried brother, sister, uncle or aunt have the right to live in the *inpui* and to be looked after till their death. There was not a single case in the village where an unmarried person has set up an independent *dông*. The elder sons and daughters who move out of the *inpui* after their marriage also have a right to return to the *inpui* in their hours of crisis and live in the *inpui* for the rest of their lives. In the village we came across a case in which the sister returned to her brother's *dông* after her divorce. In another case, the orphan children of a man's brother stayed in his house and were

looked after by him. It is in this sense that we can speak of the residential unity of the patrikin in a household.

We noticed a few interesting things in the matter of interpersonal relations in the households. It was observed that the daughter-in-law and the parents-in-law followed the principle of avoidance and therefore there was minimal interaction between them and their relationship tended to be more formal. The daughters-in-law had a joking relationship with their husband's brothers and sisters if they were of their age group. The son-in-law who stays in the household during the *mâksin* period also has a relationship of avoidance with the parents-in-law. He also shares a joking relationship with the wives' siblings if they are of their age group. Joking relationship also occurs between grandparents and grandchildren. They share an especially fond relationship. Grandparents showed more indulgence to their grandchildren than what the parents showed to their children. Relationships between parents and children were oriented toward discipline and tend to be more formal, but the children were more open towards the mother. In Mualsei, in the day time, the adult population of the village would go to the field to work leaving behind the infants and other smaller children under the care of the grandparents or the elder children. It was a common sight in the village to see an elder sibling taking care of the junior siblings during the daytime.

One of the reasons that social scientists or sociologists prefer to use and apply the concept of household is because in human societies there may be diverse kinds of residential units and because the probability of composition of members may not be always be regular. The information from the field has shown the existence of varied kinds of composition of households and broadly categorized them as simple and complex. The composition of members in such categories of households is varied ranging from a single member to more than three generation members. However, there are households which cannot be exactly referred to as 'not so typical' because they do not fit in under the simple or complex household type.

Another interesting feature is the practice related with post marriage temporary residence by sons-in-law in the wife's father's household for a period up to three years; and the post marriage temporary residence of eldest sons and their wives for four or more years in their father's household marked the composition of progression of households both in



number of living members and the number of generations. Similarly, the same household may, after three years, show a composition of regression in the number of living members and the number of generations. This temporary movement of persons in and out is repeated throughout the life cycle of father's households and it adds to the dynamics of interpersonal relations among household members.

It can be added that the societal construction of the household is inclusive in nature, because whatever may be the marital status of the members, the father's household is a place of care and protection of all its members. A household may have less or more members. In a large household, interpersonal relations are guided by two rules which apply on the basis of one's age and position. Among those in the same group like sons-in-law and wife's siblings or vice versa, a joking relationship is permissible; and those between parental age-group and status and their sons-in law or daughters –in –law the relationship is of respect and avoidance. Children, on the other hand, as in any household, are cared for and pampered by grandparents. In this sense, interpersonal relations in households is restrictive and as well as flexible.

### **Other Social Dimensions of *Dông***

We shall now discuss the *dông* in Mualsei as a functional unit. We can view *dông* in the village as a socialising unit, a political unit and an economic unit. One of the most important functions of the Biate *dông* was socialisation. A child learns both the prescribed and proscribed behaviours of the society in the *dông*. They learn good manners and the etiquette that is expected in the society. A Biate child was instructed to show respect to elders in language and behaviour. Children were also taught kinship relations and terminologies, and therefore they learnt the appropriate terminology and manner of addressing a particular kin and the appropriate way of behaving towards them. Elders trained the children in the domestic works and gave them works suited to their age and sex, and thereby they learnt the work-skills. The children were also taught to show hospitality to visitors and guests. In the household the children were also introduced into the intricacies of their customary rules and practices.

Villagers also taught the children norms regarding the extra-domestic domain. Children were instructed with the notion of territoriality and

also public and private property. They were taught not to enter the sleeping room of other's households because it a place for keeping valuables and it is a private space of the household. Entering other's bedroom is considered as a sign of bad intention in the Biате society which is even reflected in the customary rules which says *mi kunpui lut noroh* (do not enter the bedroom of others). Children were taught not to pluck fruits and vegetables from others' garden or field. They were also taught not to harm others' cattle. They were also taught to take care of public utility facilities in the village and to avoid damaging them. As the children grew up, they learned to respect authority and to conform to rules in the household and also in the extra-domestic domain.

Boys and girls were also socialised differently, following traditional gender-role expectations. Girls were advised to engage in activities like the mother's social and domestic activities, and to help in the household chores, while boys were oriented towards more intense physical activities. Girls were taught explicitly to adopt certain behaviour, to be graceful, sensitive and non-confrontational, while boys were suggested to have a tougher temperament that they should not complain nor whine. When a girl shows indolence and lack of interest in the household chores, the parents would scold her and tell her that such behaviour would bring shame to her and to them when she gets married and settles down in her husband's household. They remind her of the roles and behaviour expected of a girl in the society.

The elders in the *dông* taught the children what is right and what is wrong through sanctions, i.e., rewards and punishments. Sanctions often involve instilling a sense of guilt and denial of privileges. Children may receive a verbal reprimand or even corporal punishment. Conversely, children may be rewarded for good behavior with praise or a gesture of approval. Not all learning results from intentional teachings in the household. Children also learned by observing the behaviour of the elders and by listening to their conversation in the house. Through these processes of interaction the children internalised the norms of the society.

In the village, household as an economic unit organised the household labour and resources for the sustenance of the household. Agriculture was the main occupation of the *dông*. It is a corporate activity where all the adult members are involved. Even the young members take part in

this activity when they are free from their schools. We found very old people also taking part in the agricultural activity though in the less rigorous activities. Old men usually stayed at home and were engaged in basket-weaving, tending to the pigs and chicken, repairing and construction of houses or fences, repairing tools and implements, and looking after the kitchen garden (*rikul*). Old women looked after the infants during the day when the parents are busy working in the field. Small children, both male and female, engaged themselves in washing clothes and carrying water from the public tanks for the domestic use. The older female children assist their grandmothers or mothers in processing and cooking food and manage the domestic chores such as sweeping and mopping the floors, cleaning utensils etc. The older children, both male and female, go for collecting firewood in the forest.

*Dông* in Mualsei can also be viewed as a political unit. Authority in the *dông* is based on the kinship relations as well as the notion of seniority or juniority. In any *dông* we could find an informal council of certain eligible members to deliberate and decide upon matters of routine and special concern to the household. All the adult members, married or unmarried, were members of this council. Such a council was referred to as *dông risôn*. The father as the patriarch presides over the *dông risôn* and the final decision making rest on him. *Dông risôn* would meet to discuss issues concerning the property of the *dông*, matters relating to the life-cycle issues, matters relating to agricultural work, matters relating to the career and welfare of the children, etc.

In the context of Biate people, at the larger level clan is the basis of societal identity, and household provides for social identity of members at the level of the village. On many occasions members would refer to their father's household. It should be understood also that households cannot be seen only as residential units. At the lowest level of social interaction and social relations, the household is also the unit of social identity. Household is the embodiment of the life of the tribe because the socialization of the young is carried out at the level of households. Households are also representations of the collective and network of members, sharing of role and responsibilities, contribution for welfare and support, and kinship solidarity and care of members including rites de passage.

## Conclusion

The concept of household fit in well with the context of the present study. Secondly, it can be argued that *dông* is a physical and social entity. As a physical entity it can be seen as a place for residence, and it can be a single member household or a complex household or a household with many variants of composition. It is also a temporary matri-local residence for sons-in-law. As a social entity it can be called a patriarchal household, an inclusive unit caring both consanguine and affine, and in which demographic and subsistence activities occur. It is the unit of social identity of its members. It is a socialising body, a corporate, property-owning group, and also the context of decisions in the life-cycle issues. It is concerned primarily with the livelihood and well-being of its members and it organises the household labour and resources towards such end. It sustains and perpetuates the Biate society by bringing in new members to the society and transmitting the culture to the new generation.

## References

- Bohannan, P. (2007 Indian Reprint). *Social Anthropology*. Delhi: Surjeet Publications.
- Das, T. (1945). *The Purums: An Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur*. Calcutta: Calcutta University press.
- Fortes, M. (1958). Introduction. In Jack Goody (ed.). *The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups* (pp. i-xiv). London: Cambridge University Press.
- Mayer, A.C. (1986 Indian reprint). *Caste and Kinship in Central India*. New Delhi: Universal Book Stall.
- Nongkynrih, A.K. (2002). *Khasi Society of Meghalaya: A Sociological Understanding*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company.
- Shah, A.M. (1973). *The Household Dimension of the Family in India*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Singh, J.P. (2003). Nuclearisation of Household and Family in Urban India. *Sociological Bulletin*. No. 52. pp. 53-70.

Turner, B., Abrecrombie, N. and Nicholas, Hill, S. (1984). *Dictionary of Sociology*. London: Penguin Books.

\***Timothy L. Singson**, has submitted his doctoral thesis at the time of submitting this paper. He is currently serving in the Income Tax Department, Kolkata, Government of India.

\*\***A.K. Nongkynrih** is Professor and Head, Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya.