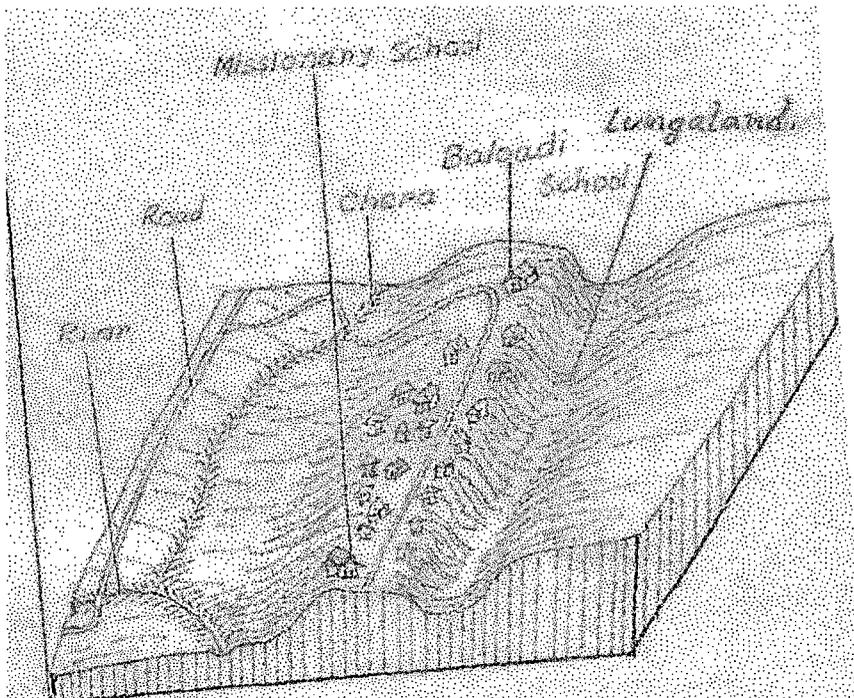


Chapter - 3

Settlement Pattern, House Type and Food Habit

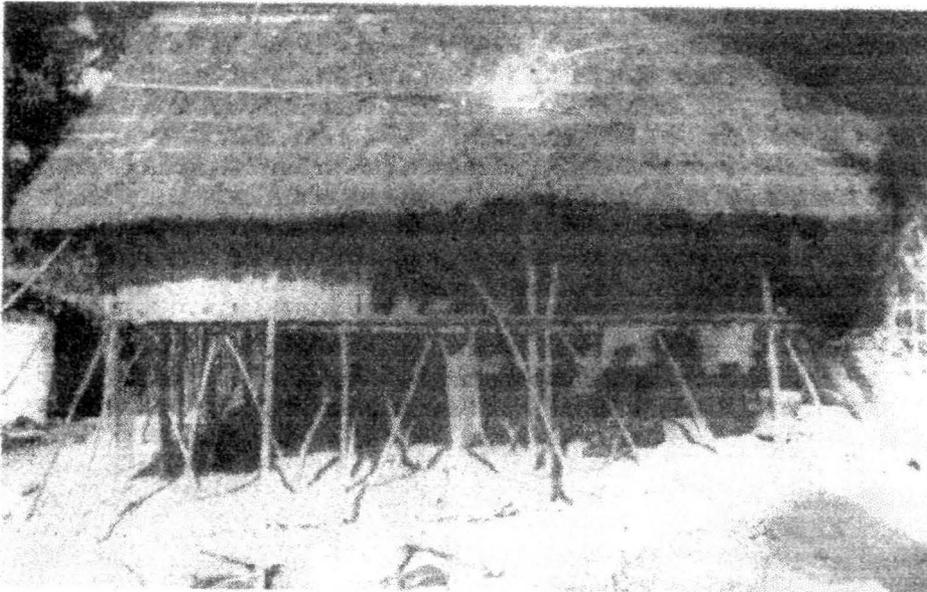
The settlement pattern and house type of a community may depend on the ecological set-up, the availability of the necessary materials, the economic condition of the members and their necessities, and the available technology. Taken together, the settlement pattern and house types are the important components of the material culture and taste of the community. Such material culture and taste are created over generations and thus constitute a part of the community tradition. These aspects of material culture are never static; they change in tune with the changing ecological, economic and social set-up.



Sketch map of a Molsom village (Kalabon Molsom Bari of Udaipur)

A Molsom village is generally set up on a hillock the top of which is more or less flat. Besides, a number of things are taken into consideration when a settlement area is chosen. The area, for instance, should be large enough to accommodate every households of a group; it should not be too densely forested and to be cleared up easily; water sources should be available nearby; it should not be far from *jhum* lands and so on. In the village the houses are generally constructed in two rows having a vacant space in the middle which is used as a path way. A traditional Molsom house is known as *chungin*. It is almost the same as that of other tribal communities of the state which is commonly known as *tang*. The *chungin* is generally constructed at five to eight feet height from the ground with wooden or bamboo pillars. The floor and walls are made of bamboo splits and the roof is thatched. There are two entrances to a *chungin*, the front door and the back door, but no window is there. In front of each door there is a balcony which is also made of bamboo splits. The front balcony is used as a place for gossiping, weaving etc. and the back balcony is used to dry food grains. Sometimes a bamboo made platform, locally known as

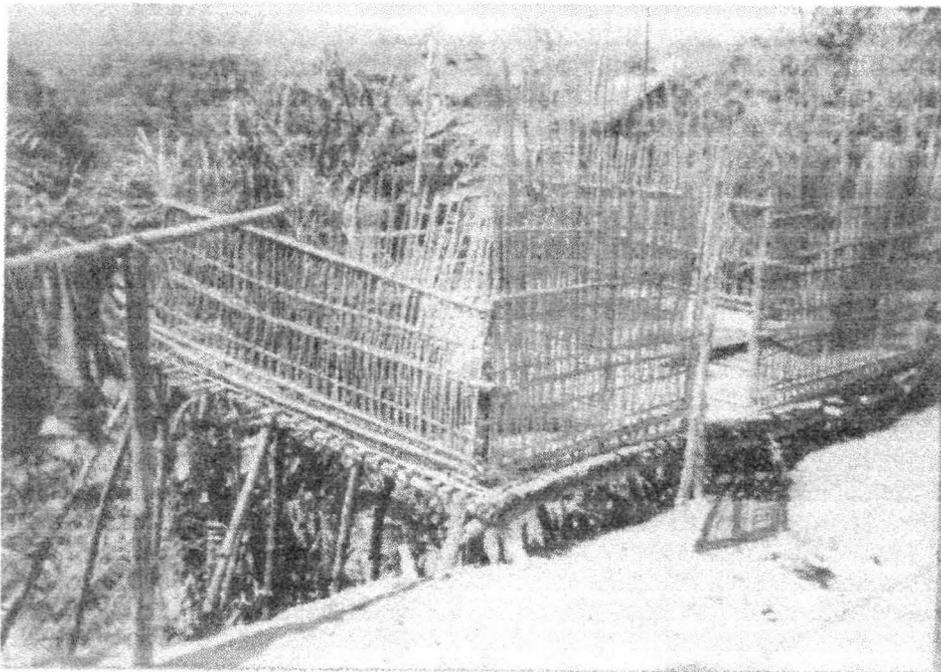
inchoor, is constructed adjacent to the back balcony to dry food grains. In the past, a group consisting of four to six houses were connected with each other by bridges constructed between the back balconies of those houses. The inside of the house has only one room which is of multipurpose use—used as bedroom, kitchen, store, drawing room etc. A mud platform is made at a corner, preferably near the back door of the floor of the house, where a hearth is made. The space under the floor of the house is protected with bamboos and bushes and is used as pigsty. The houses, especially of the traditional *jhumia* villages, are temporary in nature and made for two or three years use.



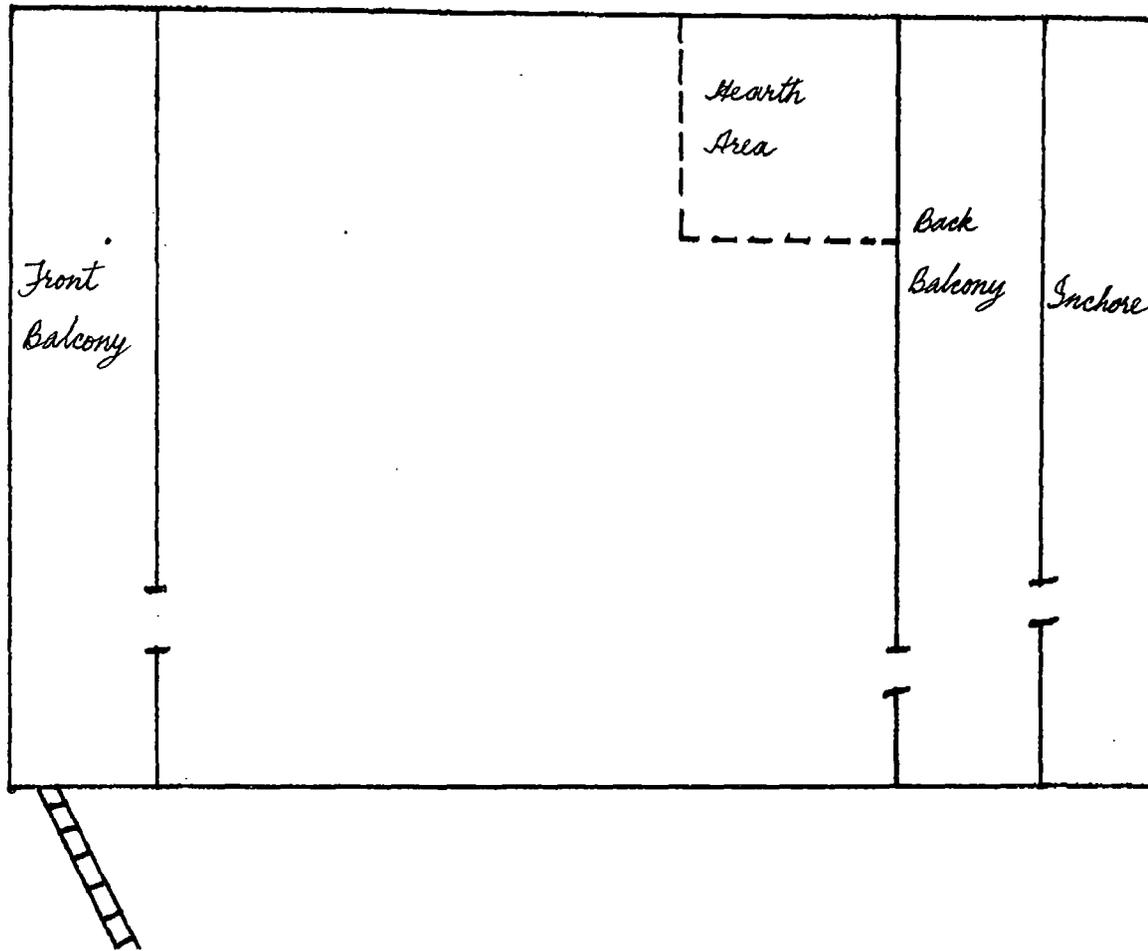
A chungin (side view)



Front view of a *chungin*



An *inchoe* is separately constructed for drying the food grains



Stair case

Diagram : 1 Ground plan of a Chungin

At present there is a trend among the Molsoms to construct houses of permanent type, constructed with wooden pillars or mud-walls and built on the ground level. Windows are nowadays found in these houses and doors number, in some cases, more than two. The houses have generally more than one rooms and, in most, cases a separate house is made for kitchen. In some cases more than one bed rooms are made and, in few cases, more than one houses are constructed for a single household.

Table 3.1 : Distribution of Molsom houses according to types

Type of house	Total number	Percentage to the total houses
1. Mud wall with thatched roof	50	17.24
2. Bamboo wall with thatched roof	180	62.07
3. <i>Chungin</i> (Tang ghar)	60	20.69
Total	290	100.00

This sort of changes in the type of the houses have resulted mainly from the adoption of permanent type of settled cultivation. In normal shifting economy the *jhumias* leave a homestead area after one or two years of inhabitation, because after a couple of years they have to shift their *jhuming* operation to a different hillock and are obliged to stay in adjacent area. Their mode of cultivation necessitates a temporary nature of settlement. Hence the house that the *jhumias* construct are also of

temporary nature. But in settled cultivation ceaseless use of the same plot of land requires stay of cultivators on a settled area year after year.

The community feeling very much come into play in the settlement pattern of the Molsoms. Usually they do not allow other tribes an entry into their own settlement area nor they settle down in the settlement area of other non-Molsom tribes. The Molsom mind-set that they prefer to live in relative seclusion from other communities and that they want to live all by themselves is nicely reflected in their settlement pattern.

I can cite one more illustration in support of the above point. In Tripura one of the important tribal development schemes is to build up tribal settlements in a compact area, which is officially known as Jhumia Settlement Scheme. In the Jhumia Settlement Scheme of the Tribal Welfare Department, a group of tribal families are given settlement in a compact area. Each of the family is provided ten *kanis* of *tilla* land, Rs.35,000 in cash for implementing various scheme-components and the settlement is provided with some infrastructural facilities like link-roads, drinking water sources like Mark-II tube well, water reservoirs, *kachcha* well, community hall, dwelling house, etc. Considering the preference of the beneficiary and depending on the nature of land, agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry or fishery-based schemes, or a combination of these schemes is provided for the economic rehabilitation of the colony-settlers. Due to paucity of cultivable plain land, the scheme is, now-a-days, limited to *tilla* land. In the year 1978-79 one such colony was established in East Khupilong *gawn sava* area of Udaipur sub-division of South Tripura District. A total of fifty families were selected, of which twenty two families were Molsom and the rest twenty-eight families were Jamatia.

Despite repeated persuasion of the officials of the Tribal Welfare Department, the Molsom beneficiaries were not constructing their dwellings in the new settlement area which was situated about three kilometers away from their original residential areas. Incidentally, all those Molsoms were

from Manithang Bari, one of my sample villages. One day when I visited Manithang Bari, my Molsom friends informed me that as many as twenty-two families of their village were selected for the colony scheme. But they were not willing shift to the demarcated settlement areas of the colony since they will have to live alongside twenty-eight Jamatia families. They were apprehending that while living with the Jamatias they will not able to share the common settlement places since they had some significant cultural deference. While rejecting the idea of a mixed settlement the Molsoms put forward an alternative proposal. They said that they be allowed to reside in their present village and be allowed to use the *tilla* land provided to them for cultivation or for horti-based schemes. They also informed that the village Manithang Bari was on *khas* land. To know the opinion of the Jamatia beneficiaries I had a discussion with some of the Jamatia beneficiaries namely Sri Kashipada Jamatia, Jaleprasad Jamatia, Shibalal Jamatia, Kharan Hari Jamatia and some others regarding the sharing of common settlement area with the selected Molsom beneficiaries under the scheme. The Jamatias replied that they have no problem sharing the common settlement areas with the Molsoms. I conveyed the opinion of the Jamatia beneficiaries to the Molsoms. But the Molsoms firmly stuck to their decision and requested me to convince the government authority to allow them to use the present homestead areas for their settlement purposes so that they could avail the benefit of the scheme for which they had been selected.

I, as an official of the Tribal Welfare Department, took up the matter with Sri Ranjit Kumar Deb Burma, the District Tribal Welfare Officer, South Tripura District and Sri K.V.Satyanarayan, the District Magistrate and Collector, South Tripura District. Both of them given me assurance that they would examine the government policy and guidelines and would try to find a solution within the official norms. As per the government policy, the sub-divisional officers were only the implementing authority so far the colony scheme was concerned. The District Magistrate and Collector instructed the District Tribal Welfare Officer, South Tripura District, and the Sub-divisional

Officer, Udaipur, to resolve the problems of selected Molsom beneficiaries of the East Khupilong *jhumia* settlement colony. Both of them took initiatives to consider the preferences of the Molsom beneficiaries. From the documents of the settlement office it was confirmed that the settlement area of all the 38 households of Manithang Bari village was actually *khas* land. A meeting was held between the members of village council, family heads and aged inmates and the District Tribal Welfare Officer, South Tripura District, and myself where an unanimous decision was taken that all the families would surrender their homestead possessions to the Tribal Welfare department and the latter then would arrange for redistribution of the land equally among the households without any discrimination. The remaining sixteen families who were not covered by the colony scheme would get benefit of other developmental schemes. Besides, the members of those sixteen families were to be engaged as labourer in the works related to the development of infrastructural facilities for the village along with the colony-beneficiaries. The members of those sixteen families would also use the infrastructural facilities created for the inmates of colony-scheme. After this the government accepted the demand of the Molsom beneficiaries of the East Khupilong Jhumia Settlement Colony and implemented the colony scheme. The part of the colony with Molsom households was named Molsom Para and the part with Jamatia households as Jamatia Para.

The Molsoms were very sincere in implementing the provisions of the colony scheme and as a result this scheme was one of the few successful colony schemes in the state. I was keeping constant contact with the inmates of the Molsompara of the East Khupilong settlement colony so long as I was in Udaipur. I was in Udaipur from 1988 to the middle part of 1994. During that period I used to visit the Molsom villages of Udaipur sub-division as and when I got an opportunity and my Molsom friends also were visiting me in my quarters as and when they came to Udaipur town. Their love and respect made me more dutiful to them. I tried to bring changes in some of their bad practices like dependence on the quack and Awchais for treatment

and to some other traditional practices. In Molsompara (Manithang Bari) a quack used to render medical facilities. He, in fact, was a cheat. He used to give some pain killing medicine, paracetamol, vitamin tablets or syrup to almost all types of patients. I found him injecting distilled water in the name of medicine. I disclosed the matter to my Molsom friends and convinced them about the bad effect of getting treatment from such quack and advised them to avail medical facilities from the nearest Government health centers or Hospital. I also arranged for frequent visit of the medical unit of the Primitive Group to the Molsom colony area so that they could develop a regular habit of accepting treatment from the registered medical practitioners. To my delight I observed that the average Molsoms gradually stopped depending on the quack. But their faith in Awchai remained as it was.

Food habit

The Molsoms are omnivorous so far as their food habit is concerned. Rice is their staple food. Two varieties of local rice, namely, *bati* and *sazu* are commonly used. The former is used in common dish and the latter is taken occasionally. Vegetables, meat, fish, dry fish etc. are common among their food stuff. A common Molsom meal consists of boiled rice, a preparation of dry fish, especially *putty* fish, chili and some vegetables locally known as *annok*, a vegetable curry or fish curry or a curry preparation of either pork or chicken or other birds or reptiles. Mainly two methods namely boiling, locally known as *but* and roasting, locally known as *kong* are used in preparing food. Food stuffs are boiled traditionally, in bamboo pot, locally known as *bul* which nowadays is replaced, in most cases, by earthen pots or metallic cooking pails. For boiling in bamboo pot, rice and water are poured and the open end of the pot is covered tightly with grass or banana leaves. The pot is then heated on fire. A special variety of bamboo, locally known as *rumaoru* is used to

make *bul*. While boiling in bamboo pot water is not strained off from boiled rice. A bamboo pot can be used only once as its outer surface gets burnt after the cooking. Traditionally, meat, fish, dry fish etc. are cooked by singeing which nowadays is limited to the case of preparing an item of dry fish only.

In the traditional method no oil is used in cooking as the process of frying or roasting were absent in food preparation. Chili, turmeric and ginger are the common spices of which the use of chili is very common. Curry, Annok and other preparations test pungent due to excessive use of chili. Locally made alkaline water known as *chaltui* is used to cook hard roots, herbs, etc. Such alkaline water is made from the ashes of dry bark of banana or bamboo plant. Keeping ashes in a funnel made of bamboo splits water is poured slowly at the open end. The alkaline water, a solution of particles of ashes, is collected in a container placed below the conical end of the funnel. Same kind of alkaline water is used also by the other tribal communities of the state and is well known as *kharpani*. Such alkaline water makes the hard roots and herbs soft and smooth.

Annok is also popular among the other tribal communities of the state and is commonly known as *godak*. The preparation of *annok* or *godak* is, more or less, the same with a little variation in the vegetables components. For preparation of *annok* at first some dry fish is taken and some vegetables such as buds of bamboo plants, known as *toi*, wild potato, arum root, beans, etc. are cut into pieces which are then put into a bamboo pot along with green chilies and dry fishes and well mixed by pulping with a small bamboo or wooden stick. The bamboo pot is then heated on fire and after that the boiled mixture is taken out and kept on a piece of banana leaf for use. Sometimes fish or meat is used in preparation of *annok*. Pork or other meat is cut into pieces, strung side by side with bamboo split and kept over the hearth to be dried up and thus preserved for future consumption.

It is observed that the traditional system of food preparation among the Molsoms and other tribal communities of Tripura has got some scientific basis for which it suits the local conditions. Mention may be made of the boiling system. On the hills, at a high altitude with low atmospheric pressure, boiling and cooking take more time. In such a situation cooking in air-tight bamboo pot minimizes the time of cooking because the water in air-tight bamboo pot boils on normal boiling point as the water vapour increase the pressure in the air-tight bamboo pot. Besides cooking in air tight bamboo pot is hygienic. Pigs usually bear the spores / germs of hook worm which affect human body if pork is taken without proper boiling. But the spores / germs die if the pork is boiled at a high temperature. The spores / germs die in the case of singeing also. In this regard it may be mentioned that the pork is a very favourite food item among the Molsoms and other tribes of Tripura. Moreover, the food value, in case of rice especially, remains intact if it is boiled in such a pot from which no water is strained off.

Traditionally, the Molsoms do not know the use of milk. Milk is considered nauseating by many of them. In this regard the other tribal communities of the state are their counterparts. Drinking of local alcoholic beverage namely *zukola* and the local liquor namely *rakzu* is most popular among them. *Zukola* is prepared, broadly, in two phases. *Chall*, the fermenting cake, is prepared in the first phase. Rice dust of about 100 grams, sugarcane leaf one piece, *cholkung*, a local herb, two or three leaves, one ripen banana, three or four pieces of green chili, *banchikolnum*, a local herb, three or four leaves and about half a kilogram of boiled rice are mixed and grinded by the pestle and mortar. Water is added to the mixture-dust to make a paste from which cakes are prepared. Some hay is spread on a banana leaf on which cakes are kept. Some more hay is spread to cover the cakes. These cakes are then kept in a cool place for about three or four days and dried in sun light. These dry cakes are known as *chall* which are preserved in bamboo made basket known as

chall- rebom . The number and variety of leaf, root, bark etc. used in *chall* preparation vary from place to place, person to person, but the rice dust, boiled rice and *chalkung* are used as the basic ingredients. The taste and flavor of the *zukola* differ according to the variety of their components.



Chall , the fermenting cakes, are dried and preserved in *chall-ribom*

In the second phase, about one kilogram of boiled rice is spread on a bamboo mat and a *chall* is mixed. The mixture is then pulped by hand and put in an earthen vessel. Water is filled in the vessel and its mouth is covered with a banana leaf. The vessel is then kept untouched in a cool place for five to six days for fermentation. Fermented beverage or *zukola* is drunk through bamboo-straw locally known as *chumki* .

The local liquor *rakzu* is prepared by distilling the local beverage. Distillation, done in the local distiller known as *batizone*, has three parts. A boiler, known as *bel*, is made of clay, a cooler tube made of clay, locally known as *somnang*, is used for cooling the liquor vapour. The liquor vapour is passed through a bamboo pipe, known as *batizone*. Another stronger liquor, *rakzual*, is prepared by distilling the *rakzu*.



Batizone : a traditional distiller used for preparation of *rakzu* & *rakzual*

Liquor and alcoholic beverages are prepared exclusively by the females. Some restrictions are observed by the women while preparing liquor or beverage. They take bath and wear clean dresses. Besides, the women who are in menstrual cycle are not allowed to take part in the preparation; they are even not allowed to touch the materials or the persons engaged in the preparation. There are some women in every Molsom village, who are well known for their expertise in liquor preparation. These women use some special bark, roots etc. which bring about the variation in the taste and flavour of the liquor. They generally do not disclose such special formula to others. And due to this simply by tasting the habitual consumers can identify the women responsible for its preparation. There are some gifted women who, the Molsoms believe, prepare liquor which is bound to be of better quality.



Preparing *rakzu* by distillation of *zukola*

Tobacco smoking is another common habit among them. This habit also is analogous to the habits of other tribal communities of the state. An indigenous implement called *dabo*, made of bamboo, is used for smoking. Traditionally the Molsoms did not know the technique of preparation of tobacco smokable by *dabo*. They had to purchase tobacco from local markets. Nowadays, however, some of the Molsoms can prepare the tobacco smokable by *dabo*. For this they purchase dry tobacco leaves and molasses from the market. Dry tobacco leaves are cut into small pieces with which molasses are mixed to the proportion of their liking.

Some formalities are observed while drinking or smoking is done in formal gathering or in groups. Persons having higher social status get first preference to smoke or drink. In a village gathering, for instance, the order of offer follows from the *awchai*, the village priest, to *khuoulm*, the village Chaudhury, *khandolloom*, the assistant to Chudhury, *khandoltoum* the messenger and other elders. Drinking or smoking in front of elders or other respected persons is not socially restricted nor is treated as unmannerly as found in the neighboring non-tribal society. Guests and other respected persons are cordially entertained with smokes and drinks. Distinguished persons are honoured and entertained with liquor

prepared from the *sazu* or *binni* rice.



Drinking of *zukola*

In Molsom society, liquor is used in every socio-religious occasion. It is used in the rites and rituals related to birth, puberty, marriage, death and worships, festivals and ceremonies — in the joy and sorrow of life. Traditionally, *zukola* was the most liked drink but, nowadays, it has been replaced by the local liquor *rakzu*. *Zukola* at present is preferred mainly by the female, whereas the *rakzu* is widely popular among the male. Minor boys or girls are not allowed to drink or smoke. In some cases, at present, molasses is used in lieu of rice for *rakzu* or *rakzual* preparation.

The memory of tasting *rakzu* for the first time in my life is still fresh in my memory. I was, at that time, doing my fieldwork in Kalabon Molsom Bari of Udaipur sub-division. It was the very day I started residing in a small house in Kalabon Molsom Bari. It was a new bamboo walled, thatch-roofed house of Sri Swaran Kumar Molsom, the Chaudhury of the village. The house was especially made as a shelter for his domestic cows. The village people spared that house for me for the period of my fieldwork. They voluntarily constructed a bamboo made *macha* to be used as my bed. In the evening of that day some young Molsoms gathered in that house with some local drinks. I welcomed them and offered them Rs.20 to meet the

expenditure of the drinks. But they refused to take the money. I honoured their sentiment. They offered me some *rakzu* in a bamboo-pipe specially made for the day's occasion. Since it was the first time I was going to taste such an alcoholic drink my mind was full of doubts whether I would be able to consume it. Just after tasting one mouth full of *rakzu*, I realised that I will not be able to swallow the whole of the liquor they had given me because of the peculiar smell of the drink that I could not stand. I, however, managed to consume, in course of gossiping, full of my share. Next day, at noon, I was invited to a family occasion. It was an occasion of observing the *abursuk* ceremony which is observed after detachment of last part of the umbilical cord of a new born baby. The new born was the son of one Nityahari Molsom. The village Chudhury and some elderly persons had gathered in a room where an arrangement was made for me to seat. In that gossiping session everybody was drinking *zukola*. Two bamboo straws were inserted into an earthen vessel full of *zukola* from which we drank. At first the Village Choudhury, Swaran Kumar Molsom, consumed *zukola* and after that some water was added to the *zukola* container and was offered to me. I found that there was a marking in the body of longer straw. I was told that I could consume *zukola* till the water level touches the marking. I started consuming as I was told. But when I started drinking through the straw, I found that some fermented rice were coming through the bamboo-straw, the taste and smell of which were not good. The village Chudhury realised my problem and he told something in Molsom to a young man. I could not understand what he told but observed that the man took another bamboo-straw one end of which was covered with a piece of cotton-net. That bamboo-straw was inserted into the *zukola* container and I consumed the *zukola* up to the marking made on the body of the straw. That *zukola* was prepared with mummy rice and the taste was almost like beer. I realised that *zukola* is a good rice beer.

Drinking water

I observed that there was some serious problems relating to the availability and habit of drinking water in the Molsom villages. At the time of my fieldwork there was no adequate supply of safe drinking water in Tripura villages, but wherever safe drinking water was made available, the Molsoms were not readily accepting them. Many did not like the well-water and its typical irony smell and therefore they preferred to stick to their traditional habit of drinking water extracted from river-beds or from some other conventional sources. As an obvious consequence, the average Molsoms, despite their better immunity system, were often suffering from water-carried diseases. I, as an official in the Tribal Welfare Department of the state felt concerned about the problem and thought of doing something to change their habit for the better.

In this context, I would like to mention about an interesting development which I experienced with regard to the acceptance of the Mark-II tube well as the source of drinking water. The inmates of the Molsom colony were habituated in using the water of a small hole made on the bank of streamlet or *crerra* to promote sand-filtered water to come out. As a part of providing new infrastructural facilities, one Mark-II tube well was installed in the settlement area of the Molsoms but the Molsoms were not using the water of Mark-II tube well since they were not liking its smell. They were using its water for taking bath and washing of utensils only. I tried to make them aware of the ill effect of using the water of *tuikaran* and requested them to use the water of the Mark-II tube well since it would be better for their health and there would be less recurrence of water-carried diseases. But there was no instant acceptance of my appeal. I, however, continued putting across my arguments for the use of well water for drinking. Fortunately, a good numbers of youths were convinced and agreed to help motivate the colony people to use the water for drinking purposes. And finally our venture was successful. The inmates of the Molsom colony

gradually started drinking Mark II- tube well water as they could feel the difference themselves.

The above discussion suggests that the ecological set-up, the economic condition, the available material, and the available technological know-how, by and large, determine the settlement pattern, house-type, food and drink habits, which in turn give a shape to their material culture. These components of their material culture do not change too often but it is also true that the Molsoms do not stubbornly stick to their traditional patterns. As and when their ecological set-up or their economic life changes or when they get exposed to the life of the non-tribals they do not hesitate to modify their traditional practices in order to accept a new form. They too have their own logic structure; that is, when they are convinced that that a new form will suit their life better they gleefully accept it. And this is how changes are taking place in their settlement pattern, house-types, and in their food habits. The government sponsored developmental projects too have to be based on this logic if these are to be accepted by the tribals.



A newly constructed water reservoir