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HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BUDDHISM OF THE TAI KHAMTIS OF ASSAM

Sanghamitra Sarma

MA (Gauhati University), M. Phil (Assam University)
Research Scholar, Dept of History, Gauhati University, Guwahati

Abstract:-The Tai Khamtis, a tribe that migrated to Assam in the middle of the eighteenth century CE, follow the Hinayana or Theravada form of Buddhism. They do so after the Burmese monasteries. Their Buddhism, however, has elements of other religions.

The present paper would look at the form of Buddhism practiced by the Tai Khamtis. While doing so, the paper would make an introductory note on Buddhism and the history of the Tai Khamtis, point out the non-Buddhist features in their Buddhism, and describe the nature of their religion and the effect of the religion on their lives. Lastly, it would focus on the important religious ceremonies held by the tribe.

Based on field visit and available literary sources, the paper finds that the Buddhism of the Tai Khamtis of Assam differs from the Buddhism that entered the state from mainland India. The Buddhism of the Tai Khamtis came from Burma and, after coming to Assam, it has incorporated many non-Buddhist, such as Hindu elements with it.

Keywords: Buddhism, image, scripture, lifestyle, religious ceremony.

INTRODUCTION:

Problems:

The Tai Khamtis constitute one of the major tribes of Assam. Yet, they are not much known to the people outside the state. The Tai Khamtis follow Buddhism ardently. However, little about their kind of Buddhism is little known to the people outside Assam. Even many Assamese scholars do not have in-depth knowledge about the religious customs and cultures of the Tai Khamtis.

Significance:

The topic of the present paper has immense significance. There are only a few Buddhist tribes in Assam. The Tai Khamtis are prominent among them. They follow a kind of Buddhism that came with them to Assam from Burma, and not from the mainland India. The point warrants attention. Moreover, the Buddhism of Tai Khamtis has influences of other religions, which also demands a methodical study.

Scope and Limitations:

The paper is based on first-hand experience and available literary sources. It has discussed Buddhism, chronicled the history of the Tai Khamtis, pointed out the non-Buddhist features in their Buddhism, and described the nature of their religion and the effect of the religion on their lives. Lastly, it has focused on the important religious ceremonies held by the tribe.

The limitation of the paper lies in the inability of many literary texts written in the Tai language and script. However, the paper has transcended the limitations by relying on authentic texts about the Buddhism of the Tai Khamtis and on the field-visits made to many Tai Khamti villages.

Methodology:

Scientific research methodology prescribed by the seventh edition of the *MLA Handbook of Writers of Research Papers* (2009) has been used in the paper.

The analytical method of historical and sociological research has been employed throughout the paper, while the comparative method has been used when necessary.

Field visits and relevant available literature have constituted the sources of the study.

Statistics Used:

Statistics has not been used in the paper. However, statistical data available in authentic books have been used. Proper reference has been given in this regard.

INTRODUCTION/ STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

More than one and a half millennia before the commencement of the Common Era, the nomadic race known as the Aryans came to India from central Eurasia. The Aryans “[brought] their [religious] practices and ideas with them. For a very long time they had a sacrificial, ritual-based religion, the sacred details of which were carefully memorized and preserved in ritual ‘manuals.’” (Hamilton 19). The Brahmins, people who held the topmost rank in the caste hierarchy firmly established by the time, enjoyed the enactment of the rituals and the preservation of the confidentiality of the ‘manuals’ as exclusive prerogatives.

Unmistakably, “[t]he correlation between religious power and social hierarchy ... was ... oppressive.” (34). As a result, there appeared a few renouncers, who “rejected ... the authority and the prescriptive norms of the brahm[a]n priests” (34) and were “peripatetic, mendicant, and celibate” (34) in contrast to these priests. In the sixth century BCE, the Buddha (c.560 BCE-c.480 BCE)

challenged the Brahmanical practices and teachings, and their claims to authority, and found no satisfactory alternative among the teachings of the renouncers. Based on insights gained at his own enlightenment, he taught a Middle Way between those of the householders [i.e., brahman priests] and the renouncers. (35).

Buddhism, the religion preached by the Buddha, spread far and wide in the following centuries. It “was prevalent in Kamarupa [i.e., in ancient Assam] as early as third century B.C.” (Goswami 28; also Dev Choudhury 102). Since then, many people of Assam have practiced different forms of Buddhism. Among these people are the Tai Khamtis, “a very rich tribe, who live in NEFA (i.e., North East Frontier Province; presently known as Arunachal Pradesh) and Assam” (L. Gogoi ix) and who “have their brethren in Bar Khamti Long in Burma and Yunan, a Chinese province.” (ix).

History has it that “the [term] ‘Tai’ first appeared in the Chinese history in Shansi and Ho-nan as early as 2515 BC.” (P. Gogoi 6). This means that the Tai people lived in China even before four and a half millennia. A section of the Tai people migrated to the Northern Shan (“highland”) states in Upper Burma evidently before the sixth century CE (11). After the great kingdom of Pong in Burma was broken up about the middle of the eighteenth century CE, a few Tai Khamtis from among the Shans (“highlanders”) in Bar Khamti Long entered Assam and were allowed to settle on the bank of Tengapani, a river near Sadiya in extreme Upper Assam, by the Ahom rulers of Assam who came from Burma in the thirteenth century CE. This was followed by the settlement of a few other hordes of Tai Khamti people in Assam. Later, the Tai Khamtis gave battles against the Ahom rulers and the British administrators, who ousted the Ahoms from power in 1826, and settled in different parts of Assam (Dalton 21; Mackenzie 27-30; 1881 Census of India Report 43-44; 1891 Census of India Report 45; Gohain 68-69). Presently, the Tai Khamtis of Assam live in the vicinity of Narayanpur in the district of Lakhimpur and in the Lidu region in the district of Tinsukia.

The Tai Khamtis follow a kind of Buddhism that came along with them from Burma. It is different from the Buddhism that came to Assam from mainland India. The Buddhism of the Tai Khamtis has incorporated many non-Buddhist, especially Hindu elements with it. This invites a proper scientific study of the Buddhism of the Tai Khamtis.

It is hoped that the study would be beneficial for students and research scholars of history, anthropology and sociology.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

A few field-based and book-oriented studies have been done on the Tai Khamtis of Assam. A notable book in this regard is *The Tai Khamtis* (1971), edited by Lila Gogoi. The book has many articles written by Assamese and Foreign scholars on various aspects of the historical, social, and religious lives of the tribe. Besides, many historical records such as reports on the Tai Khamtis have found places in the book.

Maheswar Neog's *Religions of the North-East* (1984) has an important chapter on the religion of the Tai Khamtis, while the religion has been discussed with emphasis and at irregular intervals by many scholars in *Buddhism and Culture of North-East India* (2004), edited by R. Panth.

Besides, a few PhD theses and M. Phil dissertations on the Tai Khamtis have been done in Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University.

Hypotheses:

1. The Buddhism of the Tai Khamtis is different from the Buddhism that came to Assam from mainland India.
2. The Buddhism of the Tai Khamtis has non-Buddhist, especially Hindu elements in it.

DISCUSSION/ BUDDHISM OF THE TAI KHAMTIS OF ASSAM:

Unlike the Ahoms, the Tai Khamtis have not abandoned their own form of Buddhism in order to embrace Hinduism, nor have they adopted the Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism, a Hinduized form of Buddhism practiced by many people of Assam. They follow the Hinayana or the Theravada form of Buddhism, a form that they brought from Burma. In this respect, they are akin to the other Tai groups in Assam, viz., the Noras, the Khamjangs, the Aitons or Aiongs or Aitoneas, the Phakes or Phakials, and the Tairongs, and others, and different from the followers of the Mahayana form of Buddhism, viz., the Sherdukpens, the Monpas, the Khambas, the Akas, and a few other formerly Tibetan or Burmese and presently Arunachali tribes.

It needs to be noted here that for time being the Buddhism of the Tai Khamtis of Narayanpur had elements of Vaishnavism. Maheswar Neog writes:

The Narayanpur Khamtis ... brought no Buddhist priests with them. They had, therefore, to take Vaisnava ordination from the Auniati and Dakhinpat sattras situated in the Majuli river-island. The Gohain, Maniram, made very rich presents including an ivory mattress to the Vaisnava pontiffs, and received in return Agar bark, manuscripts of Vaisnava texts. Shri Charucha Gohain, the present Mauzadar [of a section of the Tai Khamtis], has still in his possession as heirloom fragmentary copies of Sankaradeva's *Bhagavata-purana*, Book X, and Rama Sarasvati's *Mahabharata*, Udyogaparvan. But as soon as the relations with their kinsmen near Sadiya and in the original Barkhamti country were restored, the Gohain family and others readily went back to their Buddhistic faith." (Neog 94-95).

The Buddhism of the Tai Khamtis of Assam got organized with the establishment of the Burma Samgha ["Burmese Council"] in the early years of the nineteenth century CE (97). Still, non-Buddhist practices— such as killing and eating animals, taking milk of cows and buffaloes, and others— existed among the Tai Khamtis as early as 1873. In this year, T. T. Cooper made the following derogatory remark on the Tai Khamtis after he observed them getting in these and other non-Buddhist practices:

In religious matters they [i.e., the Tai Khamtis] affect to be strict followers of Burmese Buddhism, but excepting among the priests, their religion is little more than polytheism under a thin veil of Buddhist pantheism, the beauty of Gautama's teaching being utterly unknown amongst them, while many of their customs are altogether opposed to Buddhism. They kill and eat all animals, and use the flesh and milk of cows and buffaloes without scruple. The priests are men of great importance and their influence is greater even than that of the chiefs. No undertaking is commenced without first consulting them, and by pretended divinations they select and announce an auspicious day. These priests receive their office from Buddhistic institutions in Burmah, and are, without exception, strictly orthodox among themselves, though they seem to indulge the whims of the Khamtees in many religious forms and ceremonies foreign to Buddhism." (qtd. in Neog 98).

Therefore, it may be observed that, even though they have not embraced any other religion officially, the Tai Khamtis have incorporated elements of other religious faiths into their form of Buddhism. It is important to note here that Maheswar Neog has defended the Buddhism of the Tai Khamtis by maintaining that the form "has much improved since Cooper by constant insistence on the early forms of the discipline." (98).

The quote from Cooper has occasional references to the religion and the religious life of the Tai Khamtis of Assam. However, the religion and the life need to be described adequately. The description may be begun with an account of their religious institutions. The Tai Khamti villages in Assam have viharas or monasteries called *kyangs* or *changs* made in the fashion of the Burmese pagodas. In the *kyangs*, worship, prayer, and meditation are done— in the way they are performed in the Buddhist monasteries of Burma— for the good of humanity and peace and harmony among people.

The *kyangs* are also stores of many images of the Buddha generated after the fashion of Burmese sculpture, several musical instruments like *kong-pat* ("drum"), *pai-seng* ("taal"), and others, and numerous manuscripts of religious books in the Tai script. The books include the Tai versions of the *Tripitaka* and the *Jatakas*. The images of the Buddha in different postures are kept on high pedestals. This points to the prime importance of the ideals of the Buddha in the religious life of the Tai Khamtis. The *kyangs* are stores also of numerous paintings representing different stages in the life of the Buddha.

The *kyangs* are also places beside which the *bhikshus* called the *bapus* ("holy fathers" or "priests") and the *shramanaras* live (hence the *kyangs* are also called *bapuchangs*, meaning "residences of the priests" in Assamese). The *bhikshus* are celibate priests. They preach the Hinayana or Theravada form of Buddhism and teach the Pali language to the common Tai Khamti people. Their high position in the Tai Khamti society implies the special recognition that the society

accords the Buddhist belief in celibacy. They worship the Buddha by lighting candles and incense-sticks and by offering flowers to an image of the Buddha.

The bhikshus and the shramanas play significant roles also in many other affairs in the lives of the Tai Khamtis. They officiate at ceremonies that mark the birth, marriage, and deaths of these people. The officiating of the ceremonies involves devotional singing mangalasuttas (“chants for wellbeing”). The *bhikshus* “are also the schoolmasters, every free-born Khamtee youth being compelled to attend the schools in the temples, where he learns to read and write his own language, and often Burmese, using the Burmese written characters for both the languages.” (Cooper qtd in Neog 99).

The common Tai Khamti people have great compassion towards each other. This demonstrates their strong commitment to the ethical and moral ideals of Buddhism. The compassion is plainly shown in the humane treatment that they mete out to the bhikshus and the shramanas. They supply them with food called *chom* and other essential items. The villagers take turns to do so. Ven. Dharmakirti mentions that “[i]n the earlier days the [*bhikshus*] and [the shramanas] had to go out into the villages for their food, generally offered by the women who [stood] waiting at the door with ready cooked food.” (Dharmakirti 14). This is evident in the following description given by E. T. Dalton in 1872:

Every morning the priests move quickly through the villages preceded by a boy with a little bell, each holding a lacquered box in which he receives the offering of the people, generally presented by women, who stand waiting at the door with a portion of their ready cooked food. (qtd in Neog 81).

It needs to be mentioned here that even now it is the women who prepare *chom* for the *bhikshus* and the *shramanas* and gather the items necessary for the Buddha's worship in the *kyangs*.

The common Tai Khamti people follow their religion strictly. They believe that life is transitory and that only good deeds may make life peaceful. In order to become peaceful, they adopt a non-lavish lifestyle. They maintain the lifestyle by having simplicity of dress, ornament, and food. Their firm commitment to their religion is affirmed by their regular visits to the *kyangs*, making of wooden sculptures of the Buddha, and running up of small pennants called *tangkmons* inside and outside the *kyangs*. The commitment is also affirmed by their erection of family shrines inside or outside their houses.

The Tais hold many religious ceremonies such as singing of *mangalasutta*, *phi-huon* or worship of family deities, *phi-nam* or worship of ancestors, *poi-lu-phra* or gift of images of the Buddha, *poi-leng* or the chariot burial of the monks, *poi-nuon-hok* or celebration of the birthday of the Buddha, and *poi-sang-ken* or the water-splashing ceremony, and others. The Tai Khamtis of Assam perform these ceremonies regularly. They hold the *poi-nuon-hok* and the *poi-sang-ken* very elaborately.

The *poi-nuon-hok*, also known as the *Buddha Jayanti* (“birthday of the Buddha”), is performed on the full-moon day in May. It needs to be mentioned here that the Buddha was born, gained Great Knowledge, and attained *parinirvana* (“salvation”) on the full-moon day in May. The Tai Khamtis celebrate the day in the way other Buddhist communities do. The tribe performs the *poi-sang-ken* as its most important religious ceremony. The ceremony is held in the month of April. The tribesmen construct a *chong-phra*, a temple to which they carry the images of the Buddha from the *kyang* and wash the images (and the *bhikshus* and men and children) with water. After 2/3 days, the images are restored in the *kyang*. People live a religious life during the ceremony by abiding by the principles laid down in the Buddhist scriptures. The ceremony reminds of the *Rathjatra* festival celebrated in Puri, the abode of Lord Jagannatha of the Hindus.

CONCLUSION:

The Buddhism of the Tai Khamtis is different from the Buddhism that came to Assam from mainland India. It came from Burma about the middle of the eighteenth century CE and has since been assimilated many non-Buddhist, especially Hindu elements with it. The Tai-Khamtis follow the Hinayana or Theravada form of Buddhism and worship an image of the Buddha. They live a pious, humane, simple and a peaceful life and regularly hold many religious ceremonies that bear non-Buddhist influences. An example of these ceremonies is the *Buddha Jayanti*, where influences of the *Rathjatra* festival of Puri may be noticed.

Conclusions:

Please see above.

Recommendations:

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Field Visits:

Field visits to Narayanpur and Lidu were undertaken in January 2008 and February 2011.

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Sanghamitra Sarma

MA (Gauhati University), M. Phil (Assam University) Research Scholar, Dept of History, Gauhati University, Guwahati

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