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**THE KHAMTIS OF ASSAM AND THEIR RELIGION WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE KHAMTIS OF LAKHIMPUR
DISTRICT, ASSAM, INDIA**

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Abstract

The Khamtis are a part of the great Shan or the Tai or the Thai race and are regarded as Shaghai i.e. the greatest of the Shans, originally from the west of China migrated to Assam in the second half of the 18th century. Their original habitat was Mung Khamti Long or Bor Khamti or Manshi in upper Burma near the source of the Irrawaddy. To-day, they are found in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The Khamtis are followers of Hinayana or Theravada School of Buddhism. Their religion is little more than Polytheism under a thin veil of Buddhist Pantheism. The common Khamti people except the Priests are Polytheist who worships different goods and 'Phra' evil spirits or demons or 'Phi' and the spirit of the ancestors or 'phi-nam' or 'phi-dam'. Buddhist shrine is their center of religious and social activities.

Anthropologically it may be seen that Khamti religious belief and practices have very important socio-philosophical significance as well. Their approach to religion is peculiar and very significant. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss religious beliefs of the Khamtis with special reference to the Khamtis of Lakhimpur District of Assam. In Lakhimpur district Khamtis are found in the following villages, such as Bor Khamti, Sribhuyan, Deotola, Borpathar, Tripling and Gosaibari. An attempt will be

made in this paper to discuss about the Khamtis religious belief in the Himalayan range of the North-East India.

INTRODUCTION

The Khamtis are a part of the great *Shan* or the *Tai* or the *Thai* race and are regarded as *Shanghai*, i.e. the greatest of the *Shans*. Other groups of this race are *Phake*, *Aiton*, *Turung*, *Khamjang* etc, who are very akin to the *Ahoms* of Assam. Though the *Tais* or *Shans* are originally from western *China*, *Mung Khamti Long* or *Bor Khamti* or *Manshi*, near the source of the *Irrawaddy* of upper *Burma* was the original habitat of the Khamtis. They migrated into Assam in the second half of the 18th century during the reign of Rajeshwar Singha, under the leadership of *Chao-ngi Lungking Kham*. He was assisted by two of his nephews – *Chao-thao Mung (Burha Raja)* and *Chao-ai-noi (Deka Raja)*. The first batch of the Khamtis made their first settlement in Sadiya with the sanction of the ruling Ahom authorities. They established their own kingdom at Sadiya belt and started expanding their dominion.

The presence of the “Divide and rule’ policy of the British ensured that they could bait some Khamtis to be taken to Kolabari of Sonitpur district in Assam. After a few years, these people were shifted to Narayanpur Block, Lakhimpur, Assam and settled on the banks of the *Dikrong (now Mori-Dikrong)*. To-day they are found in different villages of Lakhimpur district such as *Bor-Khamti*, *Sribhuyan*, *Deotola*, *Borpathar*, *Tripling* and *Gosaibari* under Kherajkhat Mouza (all in the Narayanpur area of Lakhimpur district, Assam) which was specially created for the Khamti tribe. Some other Khamti people settled in *Sissi* of Dhemaji district, Assam, *Jakai-Khamtighat*, *Chaukham-Tengapani*, *Chunpura* of Sadiya, *Myung-lang* near Ledo and Saikhowa (both in Tinsukia district, Assam). In the process they lost their own identity and merged with the local people. At present Narayanpur along with six Khamti villages can be regarded as the second biggest Khamti inhabited area of North-East India.

Many families of these people migrated to Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh due to many factors and today they are found in *ChouKham, Kherem, Impang, Ningro, Nanam, Inthem, Lathao, Mamaung* and *Mahang* of Lohit District.

METHODS

The study was made among the Khamtis of different villages of Lakhimpur district mainly during their festivals. Some information and data have also been also collected from some prominent Khamti persons of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts who provided some books and journals having articles/ research papers on the Khamtis. Thus the information provided in the paper has been collected through field-study process.

SUB-GROUPS OF THE KHAMTIS

There are various classes among the Khamtis viz *Luk-khun, Lung-king, Khong-yek, Khong-lung, Chaukhun, Chebhai, Khan-flu* etc. Once on the socio-political angle the Khamtis were divided into two groups as – *Lu-kam* and *Nuk-tai*.

The Khamtis who migrated into Assam belonged to all the seven principalities of Khamti-Long. The various sub-groups of the Khamtis are- *Namsoom, Manchuj, Long-Keng, Khankew, Simit, manlong, Monpong, Mounkang, Mounklang, Mein, Singkai, Longehot, Mannow, Mannoï* and *Manchuykhun*.

ORIGIN OF THE TERM ‘KHAMTI’

There are three versions regarding the origin and meaning of the term Khamti.

The first version is regarding the etymological meaning of the term Khamti. The word Khamti is derived from ‘*Kham*’ and ‘*Ti*’ meaning ‘Gold’ and ‘Place’ respectively.

The region *Moulung* or *Maopung* being very rich in minerals, especially in Gold, was known as Khamti and later on the people living there came to be known as Khamtis.

The second version says that after pushing away the Tibetan Army and closing the *Nai-Khoma* pass of the Patkai range for ever, the Shan people lived in the *Shan* state peacefully for several centuries. For this region the *Shan* people residing in that region came to be known as Khamtis (*'Kham'* means to adhere to or stick to and *'Ti'* means a place or country.)

The third version Khamti is a royal title of the subordinate rulers given by the sovereigns of *Mung-kang*.

PEOPLE

Generally the Khamti people are both dark skinned and fair complexioned. As they are of Tai origin Tai *mongoloid* features are found in them like other section of *Tai* or *Shans*.

Butler describes the appearance of the Khamti people as middle sized having greater similarity with the Chinese than any other tribe in the northeastern part of India. He highly appreciates them as being active and gifted with intelligence, 'screwed war like looking race of men, but there is a sinister expression mixed with a peculiar severity, pervading their countenances that leave anything but a favorable impression of the benevolence of their dispositions'.

OCCUPATION

The Khamti people are generally good agriculturists. But at present they are engaged in different sectors like govt. service and small businesses.

FOOD

Rice is the staple diet of the people. They also eat pulses and make use of some species. They eat fish, meat, vegetables, parts of locally grown plants like *makat* (*cabage*, *Brassica oleracea*), *emzhim* (*coriander*, *Coriandrum sativum*), *phoiham* (*basil*, *Ocimum basilicum*), *pluching* (*jute leaf*, *Corcharus capsularis*) and *khumphat* (*neem*, *Azadiracta indica*) and they also use herbs to spice up their food.

DRESS

The traditional costumes of the Khamtis are very similar to the Burmese. Men wear a blue cotton jacket and a short kilt of checked cloth or silk, which looks like a plaid and a woman's dress is almost the same and the difference being that that they wear a cloth tightly bound round the chest and tied under the arms instead of the jacket.

But presently, the usually worn dress of the Khamtis is simple and neat. Man generally wears a *Lungi* (*Fa-noy*), a *jacket* (*fa-chyu*) and a turban of thin white cloth. Women use *Mekhela* (*Chi-enu*), *Riha* (*Lang-wat*), a long sleeve jacket (*Chy*)'.

RESIDENTIAL PATTERN

Generally the houses (*hoon*) of the Khamtis are built on platforms several feet above the ground which is called *Changghar*. The houses are reached by means of a ladder which is often the noted trunk of a tree. Normally platforms are of bamboos or timbers. All family members except married people live together in the same room (*hoon-ting-tinang*). But now-a-days Assam type houses (*pucca*) are also constructed. The Khamti people constructed the houses after the selection of a site for the main *post-phinam*, because they believe that it should be located in a place from all kinds of impurity.

Usually every house of the Khamtis has a veranda (*tooptai*) and a prayer place (*paitra*) in the front side. Houses consist of sleeping area called *hoon-tinam*, a kitchen-*hoon totankhaw*, a corridor – *Chanon* which connects the main dwelling and the cooking area and a washing place for utensils and other things.

RELIGION OF THE KHAMTIS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE KHAMTIS OF LAKHIMPUR DISTRICT

The Khamtis are the followers of *Theravada* or Hinayana Buddhism. *Theravada* literally means the teaching of the Elders or the Ancient Teachings, which is the oldest surviving Buddhist. This school is ultimately derived from the doctrine of analysis which was a continuation of the older Sthavira group at the time of the Third Buddhist Council around 250 B.C.

Though the Khamtis brought their Buddhism from Burma, the Khamtis of Lakhimpur district had face a difficulty as they brought no Buddhist *Bhikkhus* (an ordained male Buddhist monastic; the female is known as *Bhikkhuni*) with them at the time of their migration. But they carried some Buddhist texts, scriptures, manuscripts and Buddha images. As a result they had to take Vaishnava ordination from the Auniati and Kamalabari Sattras of Majuli, the biggest River Island of the World by two sons of Bhadiya Gohain family, Maniram Gohain and Sikan Gohain and Namsom and Lungost family respectively. But as soon as their kinship of Sadiya and in original *Bor Khamti* country was restored, they went back to their Buddhist faith and till now they preserved their religious identity which permits no social bar, caste system and untouchability like other orthodox religions.

All Khamti people believe that a true Buddhist must sincerely follow the path of the Lord Buddha. But though the Khamtis are Theravadins, now-a-days some of their rituals are oppose to Buddhism. Because the Khamti people kill and eat animals which are not supported by the Buddhist faith as Buddha *Panchasila* teaches neither to kill nor to harm others.

Regarding the concept of God and Soul the Khamtis are different from original Buddhist faith, because Buddhism denied the existence of God and Soul. There is a theory in Buddhism which is called *Anatmavada* or the theory of *no-soul*. But the Khamtis believe Buddha as the God and pray saying him as “Buddha Bhagawan”. Again they also believe and worship different Gods, *Phra*, *evil spirits or demons*, the spirits of the ancestors or *phi-nam or phi-dam* Which are for them present in trees, rivers, Gardens, houses, crops etc. The Khamti people believe and worships an Earth Goddess which is called “Nang-Vasunduri-Devi” and two supernatural agents – *Phi and Leva*.

The Khamti people believe in the bipolar concepts of *papa (sin)* and its opposite *punya*. If a man has a large amount of merit to his credit, his soul (*khwan*) will go to *heaven (muing-phi)* and when his merit is exhausted he will be reborn on this Earth. If a man has committed both *papa* and *punya* he will first go to hell (*ngalai*) and stay there till his demerit is totally expiated, then he will go to heaven to enjoy his merit before being reborn. And if his life is wholly sinful, he will be committed to hell or will wander a long time on earth as a disembodied spirit (*pikta or phi*).

From these beliefs it is clear that their concept of salvation is a strictly individualistic pursuit. According to them wisdom or merit is the means of salvation which can be earned through giving (*dana*), morality (*sila*), and meditation (*favana*). They have two alternative conceptions regarding this triad and the attainment of salvation. According to the first notion which is called “worldly merit” (*lokia-kuso*), this triad is a ladder leading to salvation. They believe that by giving and morality is a means for improving one’s future rebirths while meditation alone produces the merit necessary for Nirbana.

The second concept is called “other worldly merit” (*lokotala-kuso*) according to which this triad is a representing steps on a ladder leading to Nirbana. Because one must be reborn countless times before sufficient merit for Nirbana can be acquired.

The Khamti people practiced both cremation and burial. Dead bodies of children below 10 years, death by suicide, death during the time of childbirth and death caused by certain diseases are buried without any ceremony. If any person dies on Friday or Saturday, necessary funeral rites are done on the next Sunday afternoon. A purification ceremony is observed on the sixth and seventh day.

The sacred place of the Khamtis is the *Buddha Vihara* which is called *Kyong or Chang or Bapu-chang* is a necessary and important part of every Khamti village. The *Vihara* is prominent among the houses of every village by its height and structure. Sometimes these are look like Burmese type roofs. Generally these temples are built in eastern part of the villages situated on the bank of local rivers. In *Vihara* a number of Buddha images of different shape and size made of marble, bronze, silver brass wood etc. are placed on a high pedestal which is about 3-4 feet of height from the level of the floor. In the Buddha Vihara of Borkhamti village of Lakhimpur district there is one big Buddha image which was brought from Burma at the time of their migration. All the images are kept facing to the East as it is believed that Gautama attained enlightenment in this direction. Many religious books and manuscripts written in Pali, Hindi, Sanskrit and Tai languages are preserved inside the *Vihara*. Out side the *Vihara a Kyang-phra*, the house for washing the Buddha images during *Change-ken* festival is constructed. There is a calm atmosphere in the Vihara and people come to learn religious injunction from the *Bhikkhus* who are considered by them as their friend, philosopher and guide. It is very satisfying factor that all people irrespective of cast, creed, sex and religion can enter into the Vihara. Vihara are elaborately carved in wood, ivory and bone which are made by the priests and in the internal portion neatness is maintained. For a pious Khamti the first and the last acts of the day consist of devotional hymns performed in front of the small Shrines which are found in every Khamti households.

Monastery is an important part of every Khamti village. A village monastery consists of a single building inhabitant by its Chief Monks, several other Monks and a small number of postulants and novices. Temples and priests quarters are made of bamboo and are thatched. Within the compound of a monastery may be a small hut

inhabitant by a pious lay-man who looks after the needs of the Monks. The office of the Monks is not hereditary. Monastic property cannot be transferred without the permission of the 'Sangha'.

Every Khamti society has their Priests (*Chau-mun*) which are men of great importance. Because to commence any decision must be consult with them. Almost all the rituals related with birth, marriage and death are performed under the guidance of *Bhikkhus*. Whenever any people go out of their house or want to start a new house or agricultural work, they begin all these by worshipping Buddha through the *Bhikkhus*. The priests are also the school-masters and all Khamti boys and girls being compelled to attend school in the temples. But now-a-days as soon as formal education has been restored in the villages the children began to go to school to achieve formal education. They are the spiritual administrator, who guides people in different religious festivals. It is responsibility of the followers to provide food to the *Bhikkhus*, who may also receive gifts of the barest necessities and accept invitation to meals. As Robison mentioned "in past, in every morning the *Bhikkhus* hurried through the village or concerning area preceded by a boy with a little bell holding a lacquered box in which the *Bhikkhus* collected the offerings of the people, presented generally by the women, who stood waiting at their respective doors with a portion of their ready cooked meal". But now-a-days this is rare. Nevertheless, villagers take the first portion of their ready cooked meal to the *Vihara* and offer these to *Bhikkhus*.

Different festivals are observed by the Khamti people both individual and community level in which their religious believe reflects.

Followings are the main festivals of the Khamtis –

1) **ME-NAM-ME-PHI:**

Me-Nam-Me-Phi is a ceremony relating to *Phis* or spirits which is performed to satisfy the household deity or ancestors. The Khamti people believe that ancestors live in the Chow Lai or the main post of the house and they are prayed and offered with cooked

rice, flowers, candle etc. This festival is called by other Tai communities as *Me-Dam-Me-Pahi*. They hold it regularly on 31st January of every year. But the difference between the Khamtis and other *Tai* communities regarding this festival is that other communities celebrates it with meat of pigs, fish, homemade wine etc. but the Khamtis with cooked rice, flower etc. But in remote past the Khamtis of Lakhimpur district according to the aged people of that area is was performed till about 1928 A.D. on the bank of the *Nong how phi* tank situated near the Barkhamti village accompanying with sacrifice of buffalo, pig and drinking of wine and meat. It was happened because there was no Bhikkhus for some times. But later *Bhikkhus* came from Burma and in his effort they abandoned this practice and now they celebrate this festival by offering only cooked rice, flower candle etc. without any blood sacrifice at all.

2) **PAYA PUTHIKHAM:**

Paya Puthikham or *Poi-nen-Hok* means Buddha Purnima is held in the full Moon of the month of May, the day on which Gautama Buddha was born, attained Enlightenment and died. The festival is marked by watering the *Bo-Tree* in addition to the central ritual.

3) **POI-CHANGKEN:**

This is the festival of ‘The New Year’, which is also known as *Pani Bihu*. It is held in the month of April of every year for which it is synchronizes with *Rangali Bihu* of Assam. This religious piety and boisterous fun mixture festival continues for three to four days in which images of Buddha are taken out from the Vihara and the people pour water over the images and offer prayers to The Lord Buddha, discuss life and work of the Lord by encircle the Monks.

4) **PARIBOT OR PARIBASA:**

It is the self purificatory festival for the Monks only. This three month long festival may be observed in any temple.

5) MAICO CHUMFAI:

In this festival large numbers of firewood are offered to The Lord Buddha and his faithful disciples on a river side by prayers to The Lord Buddha and gifts to the Monks.

6) LUCHELI:

If the people badly suffer by natural calamities, this festival is organized to pray to The Lord Buddha by offering *Cheti* i.e. temporary sandy cones.

7) PRABAJYA:

This festival is conducted to christening the newly converted Monks which is observed once in three or four years.

7) RIK KHWAN OR HIK KHWAN OR HONG KHWAN:

This festival is observed to regain the lost Khwan or spirit or soul of the ailed person. Hik or Hong means to bring back and Khwan means spirit, essence of life or soul. So this festival means calling back of the souls. The Khamti people believe that spirit control every aspect of human life. In this festival some articles like cooking pot, boiled egg, rice, water, bow and arrow etc are offered by reciting some holy prayers.

CONCLUSION

Thus we have seen that the Khamtis are a Tai group of Shan origin who migrated to Assam in the 2nd half of the 18th century. They are followers of Theravada Buddhism, brought from Burma. Some time though it has been seen that they observe some extra Buddhist beliefs, they never violate rules to follow the noble eight fold path, *panchasila* and to attain *Arhatship*. They live in a very peaceful atmosphere without any violence among themselves and also with others. They observe all their festivals by inviting the people of other villages thereby fostering unity and brotherhood. They still maintain a healthy relationship with the land of their origin – Burma. Different scholars, Buddhist Bhikkhus and the people belonging to the various royal families of Burma and Thailand also come to Assam in different times and communicate their views, which we may consider a great step towards international brotherhood and unity.

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