



THE TAI-KHAMPTIS of Upper Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in Religious and Cultural Perspectives

KEYWORDS

Tai-Khamptis, Hinayana, Devotion, Tripitaka, Panchashilla, Satang, Dhamma.

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ABSTRACT

Once upon a time, the Tai-Khamptis had a glorious and chequered history throughout the entire upper Assam and Tengapani region of Arunachal Pradesh. The Tai-Khamptis entered into the Indian Sub-Continent during the first half of the 18th century from their place of origin-Moung Khampti Loung (Myanmar). They are Buddhists of the Hinayana (Therawada) School of Buddhism. In religious perspective, the Tai-Khamptis are devout Buddhists. Tripitaka, the religious text of the Buddhists, are the canon of this school of Buddhism. In cultural perspective, most of their cultural practices can be traced back to that period when they did not inherit Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION:

Racially, the Tai-Khamptis are the brethrens of the Tai-Ahoms. In many respects of life, both these communities have common tastes and practices. Their places of origin are also same i.e. Myanmar. But, the Tai-Ahoms came into the Indian sub-continent in the first half of the 13th century and the Tai-Khampti came in the first half of the 18th century. The Tai-Khamptis entered India by crossing the Patkai Range through the Chowkang Pass, and settled first permanently at the Tengapani region (Arunachal Pradesh.) By religion, the Tai-Khamptis are Buddhists of the Hinayana sect of Buddhism. They had brought the same with them from their original abode 'Moung Khampti Loung' (Myanmar).

STUDY OF THE TAI-KHAMPTIS IN RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE:

Locally, the Hinayana sect of Buddhism is known as 'Tra Straw' . This Therawada School of Buddhism basically draws its tenets directly from the teachings of Lord Buddha. Tripitaka, the religious text of Buddhism, is the canon of this school of Buddhism. This canon has three divisions. They are: Vinayana Pitaka, Sutta Pitaka and Abhidhamma Pitaka.

In every household of the Tai-Khampti, a shrine-like alter is built at its eastern direction for performing prayer and devotion. They perform prayer and devotion in the name of Lord Buddha in every morning and evening at this alter. At the alter, there consists a big shelf for keeping the necessary articles of devotion. Food offering to the God is only performed in the morning devotion.

A household devotion is usually brief and simple which only expresses reverence to the 'Triratna' : the three gems-The Buddha, The Dhamma and the Sangha. The devotee recites some words in the name of paying reverence and homage to Lord Buddha. After the recitation, the devotee would then start for the main prayer.

The devotee requests his Almighty to make him free from woes, scourges, enemies etc. At last, the devotee requests the Supreme Lord to help him or her to attain 'Nibbana': the ultimate goal of a true Buddhist. After the completion of the prayer, the devotee recites the Triratna' and 'Pancha-Silas'. The devotee then proceeds ahead to perform 'Bhavana' (Meditation). He also recites 'Anica,' 'Dukkha' and 'Anatta'. He then proceeds further to invoke the 'Vasundari Devi' (The Goddess of Earth) through water- libation which they call 'Ye-Man'.

OBSERVATION OF DEVOTIONAL DAYS:

The devotional days of the Tai-Khamptis are taken from each lunar month. There are four days in a lunar month which they consider as devotional days. They are the new and full moon days and the eighth days after each of the above mentioned days. The Tai-Khamptis collectively observe these four days of a month as devotional days which they call as 'Satang' (Uposatha) days. In the early morning of these days, the Tai-Khamptis gather in the campus of the village monastery to pay reverence to the Lord Buddha. On these days, they offer alms food to the Bikkhus (Monks) in order to gain piety and merit. Inside the monastery, they collectively light candles, burn incense sticks, offer flowers, food and gift (Dana) articles. While chanting prayer, the devotees also pay homage to the Bikkhus asking them to pardon them for their wrong deeds if they have knowingly or unknowingly so committed against the tenets of Buddhism in the past or present.

Basically, Satang (Uposatha) observation is not only related to the situational factors but also to a great extent related to certain motivational factors such as the desire of the devotee to gain merit. Moreover, The Satang observation is related to age, sex and economic status of the individual. The Tai-Khamptis also observe a ceremony which is completely domestic and is held at household level only. They called it Paritta ceremony which is popularly known as 'Ho-Pilik'. This ceremony is being observed to keep them secure, safe, and protected from the unforeseen household crisis.

In the Philosophy of the Therawada school of Buddhism, the 'Danas' like the sponsorship of Buddhist initiation rite, sponsorship of a monastic ordination, the sponsorship of a Bikkhu's funeral, the feeding of the Bikkhus and the construction of religious structures etc, are all kept in different categories according to the merit they yield. It is their belief that construction of Stupa yields the most merit among all the 'Danas'. It is followed by the construction of a 'Monastery'.

The followers of the Therawada School of Buddhism believe that the goal of every religious action is to acquire merit. They firmly believe that one's 'Kamma' can be improved only with the help of merit. According to them, meditation is the only means which can help an individual to convert his self from a creature of passion into a pure and enlightened being. The Tai-Khamptis characterize Buddhism as a salvation religion. They concern more about the future life. They give importance on stereological goals like 'Nibbana' and 'Rebirth'.

FESTIVALS AND CEREMONIES OF THE TAI-KHAMPTIS:**Sangkhen:**

It is observed in the month of April. They call this month as 'Noun Ha'. It lasts for two to three days. It is a New Year festival. Sangkhen is generally observed to invoke the blessings of the Buddha for peace, harmony, good fortune and protection from the evil influence of Chow Khunkiew –the God of misfortune, misery and disease.

Buddha Jayanti:

This festival is observed in the month of May which they call 'Noun Houk'. It is celebrated throughout the world on the full moon day of that month. The importance which lies on this day is coincided with three great events related to the life of Lord Buddha. On this full moon day of May, Lord Buddha was born, He attained enlightenment and also left for the abode on this same day.

Uposatha and Varsavassa:

They observed Uposatha and Varsavassa on the full moon day in the month of July. This month is called 'Noun Pet'. On this full moon day, Buddha taught His 'Dhamma' by turning its wheel to the other five ascetics. From this full moon day, they observed the ceremony of 'Varsavassa or Khau Wa' for three months. During these days, they perform the ritual of Uposatha and observe the moral precepts.

Satang Pout-Wa:

On the full moon day of the month of October, they observe the 'Satang Pout-Wa' festival. The special activity of this festival is the collective paying of homage and reverence to the Bikkhus by the devotees. It is a belief that after performing the 'Varsavassa' for three months as well as devoting themselves in the practice of Dhamma, the Bikkhus come out with more holiness in soul and body.

Poi-Kathing:

It is observed on the full moon day in the month of November. November is named as Noun Sipsong. The main function of this ceremony is the offering of yellow robes (Sangkan) to the Bikkhus by the devotees. They also called it 'Kathing Sibar Dan' ritual. The women folk generally weave the robes (cloths) within a night in order to offer the same to the Bikkhus.

Mai-Kow-Sum Fai:

The festival of Mai-Kow-Sum Fai is celebrated on the full moon day of February which they call as 'Noun Sam'. This festival is observed with great solemnity paying homage to the momentous events of the last years of Buddha's life.

Lu Kongmu:

On the full moon day of March, they celebrate the ceremony of Lu Kongmu. The special feature of this ceremony is the renovation and refurbish of the old Pagodas, Shrines and other monuments.

Khamsang:

It is a traditional initiation ceremony by which a young boy is initiated to monkhood. As the ritual of the function, religious chants are recited by the devotees throughout the day. In the morning, the initiating boy is taken a bath and a specially decorated cloth- 'Nung Seng Chep' is provided to wear.

Tun Patesha :

This ceremony is observed as a token of an event related to the life of Buddha. On that day, a decorated artificial tree is carried out by the devotees in and around the village with the help of a carrier.

Lu -Phraa:

The specialty of the ceremony is the offering of Buddha's statues to the Monastery as a 'dana' by a family or by the whole village.

Lu Kongmu Pet Mun Si Heing:

Among all the ceremonies, this ceremony is the rarest one whose preparation is so grand that it is not possible to celebrate the same in a small area. Literally, 'Lu' means 'dana', 'Kongmu' means 'pagoda', 'Pet Mun' means 'eighty thousand' and 'Si Heing' means 'four thousand'.

Phi-Suo-Mung:

This ceremony is observed in the fifth (Noun Ha) or sixth (Noun Houk) month of the year. Here, the Bikkhus (monks) are invited for the performance of the ceremony. The objective of the ceremony is to invoke the invisible power of Lord Buddha to counter against the evils which are hovering around the village.

Hong Khwon :

It is a spirit calling ceremony. 'Hong' means 'to bring back' and 'Khwon' means 'spirit or soul'. In this ceremony, 'Leng-don'- the God of Heaven- is worshipped to grant long life and prosperity to the King and the country. It is also practiced at the individual level.

Pang Chi Mung:

This ceremony is solemnized whenever their village is faced with certain calamities and misfortunes. It is observed at the village as well as household levels. It is performed under a big tree nearby their paddy fields by constructing a temporary hut.

Here, the unmarried women play the dominant role. Literally, 'Pang-Chi-Mung' means the spirit of Manabhum Hills which is popularly known as 'Dangoria Baba'.

Me-Nam-Me-Phi:

The main feature of this ceremony is the homage and reverence to their ancestors at the community level. Now a days, the practice of observing the ceremony at the household level is also seen.

Phat-Lik-Mung:

The performance of this ceremony is to invoke the blessings of Lord Buddha in order to protect their village from calamities. Such a ceremony is performed unitedly in the midst of the village.

Phi-Phi:

It is performed annually at the household level. A small hut is generally kept in the eastern or south-eastern corner of the campus in which, they believe, the Spirit of Welfare and Happiness resides. As the ritual, they offer food, fish, meat and other eatables at the hut.

Phat-Lik-Chao-Oi-San:

This ceremony is observed in order to protect themselves from the evil spirit and thus to prevail peace and prosperity in their village.

STUDY OF THE TAI-KHAMPTIS IN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE:

If we observe deeply and analytically the culture as practised by the Tai-Khampti society are mostly traced back to that period when they did not inherit Buddhism. Thus, most of its cultural structure is Pre-Buddhist in nature and character. The Cultural System of The Tai-Khamptis is enumerated head wise:

(A) Marriage Culture:

In marriage, the Tai-khamptis observe the clan exogamy and tribal endogamy systems. They practise three types of marriage systems. They are: Arranged Marriage, Marriage through service (Khoun -Khoi) and Marriage by elopement (Pai-Pin-Hun).

(B) Food Culture:

Generally, the Tai-Khamptis consume boiled food. Tradition-

ally, they do not use oil and spice in their curries. They have some special kind of dishes viz, 'Pasa'.

(C) Dress culture:

Their traditional dresses look simple but very elegant. In the remote past, the Tai-Khampti men used to wear heap-length the jackets of blue colour cotton cloths. As lower garments, they wore calf-length chequered cotton cloths round the waist. On the head, they used to wrap long white cotton cloths just like that of a turban, they call it 'Pha Hu'. The women folk used to keep long hairs. Today, as a traditional dress, the men folk use to wear cylindrical shaped chequered cloths as a bottom garment. They call it 'Phanoi.' As an upper portion garment, they wear white shirts. The womenfolk wear a long white blouse down to the waist. As bottom garment, they wear dark colored cylindrical shaped cloths at the waists down to the calves. The married women wrap green coloured cloths i.e. 'Longwat' at the waists.

(D) Cultures of Birth and Death:

During pregnancy, a Tai-Khampti woman is not supposed to cross over the ropes which are used for tying cattle. She is also not supposed to keep her feet on the shadow of a man. After the seven days of the delivery, the male baby is taken out by the baby's maternal uncle to show the sun for performing rituals. A female baby is generally taken out after five days of the delivery.

A witness should be there at the time of one's death in order to perform 'Shradha' or 'Shom'. Shradha is also not performed for those persons who die during Sangken, due to thunder bolt and suicide, the minors and also the matured unmarried man and woman. The body of such person is generally not burnt, but buried at the burial ground. The 'Astasihil' holders are, however, kept excluded from this purview. Traditionally, the Tai-Khamptis perform 'Shradha' on the seventh day from the day of death.

As the Monks are the holders of 'Dasasihil', no general ceremony, rituals and common practices are applicable to them when they expire. So, in place of 'Shradha', 'Poi-Liyeng' (chariot festival) is performed at the death of a monk.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, it has been observed that the people of Tai-Khampti beautifully amalgamated the pre-Buddhist practices and culture with the principles and practices of Therawada School of Buddhism which they are practising today. This amalgamation of two different beliefs and practices made their religion and culture even more attractive, dynamic and beautiful.

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