

# Understanding of Religious Beliefs and Practices of Buddhism: A Study with Special reference to Tai Khamyung Community of Assam

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## Abstract:

Buddhism, one of the world's oldest religions, one of the newest humanistic approach dedicated to the pursuit of human understanding. Buddhism is immensely hopeful about everyone's ability to overcome suffering, lead fulfilling lives, and create societies where people may live in peace and harmony. The teaching of unsurpassed compassion was conveyed through the Buddha's followers. Of course, the Buddha's followers taught certain key ideas, but the main point of Buddhism has always been—and still is—that it is a dynamic religion. The Tai Khamyungs or Khamjung popularly known as “Noras” are one of the sections of Great Tai Race. They are also known as “Shyams” because they feel a close affinity with the Great Tai community, who use the title Shyam. The Tai Khamyungs are the followers of Theravada Buddhism and racially they belong to the Mongoloid stock. The present study is an attempt to analyze the religious believes and practices of Tai Khamyungs, a Buddhist community of Assam.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Tai Khamyang, Rites, Rituals,

## Introduction:

Assam is a north eastern state situated in the periphery of India. The present name of assam was known in ancient times by different names such as Pragjyotish or Pragjyotishpura, Kamrupa, vaishali and MOUNG-DUM-SHOUN-KHAM (Country Full- garden-gold or the country full of golden gardens) as we find in different texts.( S. Sasanananda, 1986.)<sup>1</sup> From time immemorial the state Assam has absorbed multiple and diverse cultures, religions and linguistic groups into its fold. People from varied regions have migrated into this state across different time periods. These variations provide a rich culture to this society. The history of Buddhism is very old in Assam. Buddhism –a religion that has added to the multi-cultural fabric of Assam. We do not know clearly when Buddhism became popular in the north-east India. However, we know in certain terms that from early historical period, Buddhism was popular in Assam. The accounts of Chinese traveler Hien-Tshang mention the popularity of Buddhism in Pragjyotishpur during the reign of Kumar Bhaskar Barman.

There are basics two forms of Buddhism are present in this region. P. C. Choudhury mentioned that the Buddhist remains of Assam associated with Mahayana and Vajrayana forms. (Choudhury, P.C.1998)<sup>2</sup> Again Sahajiyana form of Buddhism makes a stronghold in some parts of Assam. According to the 2011

census of India, there is only 0.18% Buddhist population in Assam. Majority of them belong to Tai races (Choudhury, P.C.1998)<sup>3</sup> (Tai Khamti, Tai Khamiyang, Tai Aitons, Tai Phake and Tai Turung). It is important to mention here that Assam too have not seen major growth of Buddhism in the state. It is chiefly because; the royal families were neither involved not actively participated in popularizing the religion. With the passage of time, Assam together with different parts of the main land India, witnessed striking decline of Buddhism. Presently only some social groups follow this religion in the state.

### **Objectives and Methodology:**

The present study is an attempt to analyze the religious beliefs and practices of Tai Khamyangs, a Buddhist community of Assam. The study is concept-based, philosophical enquiry. Initially, it aims the conceptual description of the religious practices and beliefs of Buddhism among the people of Tai Khamyangs community of Assam. Secondly, the study attempts to decipher the theoretical constructions which it descriptively lined up with the religious understanding of the Buddhism in Tai race. Therefore, methodologically, the present study resorts to conceptual assessment grounded on textual description and interpretation.

### **Discussions:**

Materials available are certainly indicative of the fact that the Buddhist faith had some hold on the people of Assam.(I.H.Q. 1927)<sup>4</sup> In fact there are many references to Buddhism in ancient Assamese literature: in the writings of Madhava Kandali, Ananta Kandali,( I.H.Q. 1927)<sup>5</sup> etc. These Dhamma cults indicate that Buddhism permeated into all the “Satra” (a religious institution in Assam, or monastery) of social life in Kamrupa. It generally influenced the thoughts of the times. It influence in notiveable even in the Vaishnavite revival of Sankardeva in the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D.( I.H.Q. 1927)<sup>6</sup>

History needs to identify Tai races particularly the tai Ahoms and the Tai stock known as the Shans.(W.O. Dodd. 1923)<sup>7</sup> We must indentify their homeland before their immigration to Assam or Kamrupa or elsewhere in 1228. These were the people who brought Buddhism only with them into Assam as it was a part and parcel of their life.(Encyclopedia of Religion)<sup>8</sup> Thousands of years before the Christian Era the Tai people were believed to have lived in the Altai range of Mountains- now forming the Western border of outer Mongolia.( Prince Chula Chakrobongs1967)<sup>9</sup> It is said that Ailaos were the ancestors’ of Tai, Shan and Lao.

W.W. Cochrone says that the Tai race, under several local tribal names, were always one and the same people who occupied a far wide range than any others in the Indo-Chinese peninsula. In Assam, known as Ahom, along the borders of Burma and China. There were divided into numerous and semi independent clans bearing (in Burmese) generic name of Shans.(W.O. Dodd, 1923)<sup>10</sup> R.C. Majumder refers to Tai kingdom in Yunnan as early as the second century B.C. and there was regular communication by overland route, between East India and Yunnan.(R.C. Majumder, 1963)<sup>11</sup> The two Indian Buddhist missionaries who visited China in the first century A.D. most probably passed through Assam. (R.C. Majumder, 1963)<sup>12</sup> During the sixth century A.D. some Buddhist monks from Eastern India probably from Kamrupa went to China. (P.C. Choudhury)<sup>13</sup>

In the four major areas of East Asia, namely Shan states of Burma, Siam (Thailand) French Indo-China and Yunnan and also the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam they are known respectively as the Shan Burma, Siamese of Thai (Tai) in Thailand, Leo in French Indo-Chaina and Pai in Yunnan of China and also Ahom in Assam. Besides Ahom, there are Tai races known as Tai Kamti, Tai Phakey, Tai Khamyung,

etc. (P. Gogoi)<sup>14</sup> There are many instances of the same group being named differently by different peoples and at different historical periods. But the members of the great Tai race, to whatever local groups they might belong, called themselves Tai. (P. Gogoi)<sup>15</sup>

The Assam Branch of the Tai whorled for about six hundred years (A.D. 1228-826) in the Brahmaputra Valley is known by their local name: Tai Ahom. The other smaller groups by of Tai race that came to Assam during a later period are known by various local names. Unlike the Hinduised Ahom, these latter immigrants still preserve their traditional customs including Buddhism which they process. (P. Gogoi)<sup>16</sup> According to some scholars the Tais comes to Assam at a later date under Buddhist influence.

### **Buddhism among the Tai people of Assam:**

With reference to the living Buddhism in Assam, as professed and practiced by the Tai people, it can be broadly divided into two schools, namely the southern school of Buddhism or the orthodox tradition of Buddhism, the Theravada and the Northern school of Buddhism, the Mahayana Buddhism which spread all over this land. (J.A.S.B.,1855)<sup>17</sup> The Theravada Buddhism spread into Assam with the advent of the Tai tribes, such as Tai Khanti, Tai Phake, Tai Aiton, Tai Khamyung and Tai Turung.(Pragjyotish Souvenir)<sup>18</sup>

### **The Tai Khamyung Community of Tai race:**

The Tai Khamyung (who called themselves Shyam) is a group of the Tai race adds they were formerly inhabitants of Mongolyang. On their way to Assam they resided on the Patkai ranges. Owing to the oppression of the Singphos, the local tribes of this region, they were compelled to leave the place and come down to the Brahmaputra in the beginning of the present century. (Pragjyotish Souvenir)<sup>19</sup> In 1848 it is reported that the Khamyungs got mixed up with the local people, but somehow retained their own traditional customs and religion i.e., Buddhism.(Pragjyotish Souvenir)<sup>20</sup>

At present the Khamyung, except the villagers of Pawai, a village situated on the Burhi Dihing in the district of Dibrugrah can hardly speak Tai. They are Buddhists and *viharas* or monasteries are to be found in every village.

### **Religious Believes and Practices of Tai Khamyung Community:**

The Tai Khamyungs are Buddhist by religion and as they are the followers of Theravada Form of Buddhism. The Buddhist Khamyungs are divided into three sections- '*Panchasheel*', '*Asthasheel*', and '*Dashasheel*'. All Buddhists are included in *Panchasheel* section and they have to observe five Buddhist creeds. From middle age to the old age, some people have to observe the eight Buddhist creeds at *Purnima* and *Amabashya*. The '*Vante*' and '*Vikshous*' are included in *Dashasheel*. They have to observe ten Buddhist creeds. (Chowsan, N., 2006)<sup>21</sup> All religious functions are entrusted with the *Vante* who is considered as their main priest. The public worshipping place within the village is *Vihara*.

There are two kinds of worship- community and household. To maintain peace and wellbeing of the household they worship the '*Phylum-khuta*' (Main post). They also celebrate '*Mangala*' at the beginning of each year for the wellbeing of the family. The *Vante* recites a kind of '*Slokas*' called '*Mangala-sutra*' in this function. Besides these they also celebrate a festival called '*Poi*'. In this festival the house holder invites *Vikshous* and offers them a feast. Moreover, Buddha's image and a '*Siver*' (a kind of cloth which is prepared within one night) are offered by the family. Only one family is permitted to celebrate '*Poi*' festival in a year. (Sarma, P., 2001)<sup>22</sup>

To maintain peace and wellbeing of the community of Tai Khamyung performs some community festivals like '*Poi Changken*', *Buddha Purnima*, *Magh purnima* etc. In the beginning of the Assamese *Bohag* month, the people of the Tai Khamyung celebrate '*Poi Changken*'. During this celebration Buddha's image is shifted to a place which is known as *Kamgpha Ghar* made in an artistic manner for bath having some special water mixed with perfume. During the time of bath young boys and girls enjoy by singing and performing dances together. After the bath, people pray by lighting candles in front of the *Kamgpha Ghar* for the wellbeing of the whole world. They also organize a religious assembly. After three days it is again shifted to its original place.

The Tai Khamyung group observes particular rites and rituals in the event of a person's birth, marriage, and death as Buddhists. While their death and disposal ceremonies differ greatly from those of other Assamese people, their birth and marriage traditions are identical. They have a mechanism in place for both cremation and burial of deceased people. When someone passes away, their body is removed from the room and placed next to the house's "*Phylum Khuta*," or main post. After giving them a wash, the corpses are combined and oil is applied to their hair. Following placement in a wooden casket, the body is either buried or burned. The *Vante* stands towards the head of the dead body and recites a portion from the Buddhist scripture. The dead bodies of the *Vantes* always cremated. (Sarma, P., 2001)<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, it can be observed that while the Tai Khamyungs deeply adhere to Buddhist teachings and practices, they also maintain a unique blend of traditional beliefs, customs, and rituals that distinguish them from other Buddhist communities in Northeast India. This distinctive synthesis of religion and tradition has given the Tai Khamyungs a unique identity, not only as a religious community but also as a distinct caste group within the socio-cultural landscape of Assam.

Furthermore, the study highlights that, despite the pervasive influences of globalization and modernity, religion continues to play a pivotal role in shaping the socio-cultural lives of the Tai Khamyungs. Their practices, rituals, and communal traditions reflect a harmonious balance between preserving age-old cultural heritage and adapting to the evolving social realities. This enduring connection between faith and identity underscores the resilience and adaptability of their Buddhist tradition, ensuring its relevance and vibrancy in contemporary times.

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