



TAI BUDDHIST MIGRATION TO ASSAM: A STUDY OF THE KHAMYANGS

Rintu Handique

Assistant Professor

Department of Education

Harhi College, P.O. Gobindapur (Dhakuakhana)

Dist. Lakhimpur, Assam, India

Abstract : This study has been undertaken to study the history and migration of Tai Buddhist communities to Assam, with special reference to the Khamyang tribe. They belong to the Tai group of Shans of Southeast Asia. The country from where the Tai people migrated to Assam, India was Burma, now called Myanmar. They belong to Theravada Buddhism with some of extra-Buddhist rites and rituals. Believing in Buddhism, the Khamyangs of Assam, India wants to attain arhatship and salvation by following eightfold path of Buddhism. The present paper will focus on the history and migration of the Khamyangs, a group of Tai people to Assam, India.

Key Words- Tai Buddhism, Theravada, Khamyang, Migration, History.

Introduction:

The Buddhist tribes of Assam belong to the Tai group of Shans of Southeast Asia. The name or rather the title 'Tai' undoubtedly refers to the race whereas the designation 'Shan' is said to be of Burmese origin, means probably "Highlanders". The home of the Tai people, or rather the region where they emerged as a distinct ethnic group, was in South-West China, whence, scholars say that it was from here in course of time, under the pressure of the Chinese and other invaders, the people had to move in successive waves towards the south and east, and following the courses of the rivers- the Irrawaddy, the Salween, the Menam, the Mekong and the Brahmaputra they scattered over vast areas.² This course of the history of their migration and expansion was of long duration and of varied experiences. P. Gogoi has rightly observed, "The history of their migration is a history of long centuries of struggle when they had to carry on both against the Chinese imperial pressure from the north and against the powerful neighbours in the south."³ Thus one now finds them in a wide area of the globe extending over the territory from Assam in India to far into the Chinese province of Kwang-si and from Bangkok to the interior of Yunnan taking different names of identity at different places, e.g., *Shan* in Burma, *Siamese* in Thailand (Siam), *Lao* in French Indo- China and *Pai* in Yunnan.⁴ But whatever may be the local names of these people, they call themselves only Tai.

The country from where the Tai people migrated to Assam was Burma, now called Myanmar. It is believed that the Tais migrated to Burma from the 6th century B. C. or probably even earlier, from that region of South-West China. As recorded by scholars, they migrated first as peaceful immigrants in search of safe and fertile areas to settle down; but in course of time, they also came in a great horde and founded their settlements by subjugating the local tribes. Their settlements finally came into being as states well known to the historians as the Shan states of Burma.⁵

Tai migration into Assam:

From Burma, particularly from upper Burma bordering China, many groups of the Tai people migrated to the Brahmaputra Valley in the historical times. But the most important and large migration was that of the Ahoms, a branch of the Tai called Mao-Shan in Burma, under the leadership of Sukapha in 1215 A. D.⁶ Ney Elias has asserted that a Tai prince named Sam-Long Pha had led a campaign much earlier to that of Sukapha during which he subjugated a few tribes like the Moran, Borahi and Chutia.⁷ However, his campaign could not leave much imprint on the socio-cultural and political life here. As against this, Sukapha founded a state here which lasted for six hundred years till the early 19th century, and which gave the name 'Assam' to this land.⁸ Known as Ahom Sukapha's Tai campaigns brought with them not only their socio-cultural systems, but also religious beliefs and practices where, according to many scholars, Buddhist elements prevailed.⁹

Migration of the Later Tai-group:

Since Sukapha and his successors formed a well-developed state and maintained strict vigilance on its eastern frontier, no such migration of significant magnitude took place from this side for almost over six hundred years. But, towards the close of the Ahom rules, internal trouble and external invasions shook up the foundation of the state. And taking advantage of this weakness a few tribes from across the border came to the Brahmaputra Valley. They included the Tai Khamti, Tai Phake, Tai Khamyang, Tai Turung and Tai Aitons. All these tribes were Buddhist by faith and practiced its *Theravada* form. Thus, Buddhism which was extinct in its birth place staged a comeback to India along with the coming of the groups of Tai people. They are now settlers of upper Assam, mainly in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Karbi Anglong.

The Tai Khamyang:

The Khamyangs or Shyam are a small group of Tai people who formally resided in the Patkai range. The Khamyangs call themselves Nara and their neighbors, the Assamese, call them Khamyang. The original home of the Khamyangs is reported as Mung-kong of upper Burma and from there they came to reside in Patkai range. The word 'Khamyang' means the land of gold. It is said that their occupation was panning (*yang*) of gold (*kham*) and thus, they came to be known as Khamyang. They are numerically a small indigenous group found in some districts of upper Assam. The Khamyangs are followers of Theravada Buddhism in Assam. A small minority speaks their native Tai Khamyang language and others speak the Assamese language. They are closely related to the Khamti, another Tai Buddhist group of Assam. They maintain a good relation with other Tai groups of Assam as well as with neighboring people living with them.

Regarding their migration to Assam it is recorded that the Naras or the Khamyangs had their independent kingdom in Burma till the end of the 18th century. They were the kinsmen of Ahom and they, probably, entered Assam with king Sukapha. It is found in Ahom chronicle that king Suhung mung married to a sister of Nora king in 1528 A. D. Another Ahom king Su kham pha also married to a Nara princess in 1576 A. D. In this way, probably, the Khamyang people entered Assam and established intimate relationship with the Ahoms.

The Khamyangs were recorded as in charge of the pass over the Patkai and were divided into two section called *Man-Nam* or *Pani-Nora* or low land Nora and *Man-Noi* or *Parvatia Nora* or highland Nora. It is assumed that most probably Sukapha gave the responsibility of guarding the pass to the *Man-Noi* or *Parvatia Nora*. The *Man-Nam* or *Pani Noras* were the low land cultivators. According to scholars both Khamyang and Nora are the same people. In this connection, Grierson opines:

"Nora is the name by which the Mung Kong Shans are known to the Ahoms, and frequent references are made to them under that name in the Ahom chronicles. The persons known to us as Khamjangs or Khamyangs, are a section of that race who formerly resided on the Patkai Range, but who, like so many of their congeners, were driven to take refuge in Assam at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the oppression of the Kachins."¹⁰

According to a Khamyang tradition they have been in Assam for many centuries. When king Sukhapha had settled himself in Assam and found the living good, he sent his brother back to the region now known as Burma, on the other side of the Patkai hills to tell the Khamyang about his conquest. As a result, in the later half of the 13th century, the Khamyang people first started their journey for Assam. According to another Khamyang tradition, they migrated to Assam at the beginning of the 19th century owing to the oppression of the Singphos. About their original homeland and migration, the Khamyangs believe that they had come from Thailand via Burma. Originally they came from Tibet and before they reached their present homeland in Assam, they settled down in the Shan province of Burma. According to another tradition, as reported by the scholars, the original homeland of the Khamyang is recorded as Khamti and the Naras of Khamti used to be employed as astronomers and writers by the Ahoms. But it is not known whether the Naras of Khamti and the present Khamyangs of Assam have any historical communication. The historical Naras of Khamti were reported by the scholars as highly educated and comparatively civilized. Gait also stated that the Nora or Khamyang was a comparatively civilized group of Tai people and they were employed by the Ahoms as astronomers and writers.

The exact period of migration of the Khamyang people to Assam was not known. But the scholars and the local people of this tribe are agree in this point that they previously lived in the Patkai range and migrated to Assam due to the oppression and atrocities of the Singphos and they had kin relationship with the Ahoms. However, it has been stated that the Khamyangs left their villages on Patkai about the beginning of the 19th century and migrated to Assam. They first settled at Sadiya and then migrated to the places near Jorhat. The Khamyang people believe that in Assam they first settled in the place Narapathar of Jorhat and that is why they were called as Nara.

At present, the Khamyang people are confined to two states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. In Arunachal Pradesh, they concentrated themselves in some villages like Nang-tao, Jonapathar and Khai-su of Lohit district. In Assam, the Khamyang people are spreading over ten villages of Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar and Tinsukia districts of upper Assam. The census report of 1891 recorded only 35 persons as Khamyangs. Again the census of 1911 shows 348 souls of people. It is found that population of the Khamyangs increased to 2,473 in 1991 census. At present, their population is counted as about 2,988 persons. The Khamyang inhabited villages in Assam are – (i) No. 1. Rajapukhuri Shyam gaon of Golaghat district has a population of 340 persons. In Jorhat district, there are three villages namely (ii) Balijan, (iii) Betbari and (iv) Na Shyam gaon with a population of 319,216 and 220 persons respectively; and in the five villages of Sivasagar district, namely (v) Disangpani gaon has 397 persons, (vi) Chalapathar village has of 499 persons, (vii) Chala Bongaon has only 75 persons, (viii) Moniting gaon has 184 persons and (ix) Rahan Shyam gaon has 462 persons. There is one village called Powai mukh in Tinsukia district with a population of about 276 persons.¹¹

As the believer of the *Theravada* Buddhism, the Tai Khamyangs of Assam want to attain *arhatship*, a state of ideal saint who obtains personal salvation by extinction of all miseries, by following the eight fold path of Buddhism. Their attempt at obtaining *arhatship* and salvation is reflected not only in their practice of pure religious norms, but also in the various socio-religious functions. As a result all their rites, rituals and social functions in reality constitute their religious beliefs.

Conclusion:

It has been noticed that the Khamyang people are heavily mixed up with the neighboring Assamese society and used to speak Assamese for all the purposes. The aged people of the villages can only read and write Tai language and they use it only for religious purposes. The Powai Mukh village of Tinsukia district of Assam is the only Khamyang village where all the villagers are still speak Tai while others speak Assamese in their daily life. They are hard-working agricultural people and practice wet rice cultivation like all the Tai people of Assam. The Khamyangs like other Buddhist Tai communities of Assam observe many rites and rituals and celebrate functions of socio-religious nature. These are celebrated by them almost throughout the year. These festivals, rites or rituals are observed mainly in the *viharas* and under the guidance of the *vikkhu*. As a matter of fact, they reflect not only their social norms, but mainly their religious beliefs and practices.

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