

Research Article

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Theravada Buddhism in North-East India: a study of the Tai-Khamtis

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Abstract: North-East India is an abode of colourful ethnic communities having distinct cultural pattern and way of life. Among the ethnic communities of North-East India, the Buddhist ethnic communities are significant as far as the history and culture of the region is concerned. Among the ethnic communities of the region, professing *Theravada* form of Buddhism the ethnic groups namely, Tai-Khamtis, Tai-Phakeys, Tai-Khamyangs, Tai-Turungs, Tai-Aitons, Singphos, Tikhak Tangsas, Chakmas, Moghs, Boruahs etc are prominent. Among the eight states of North-East India, the state of Arunachal Pradesh is notable for *Theravada* Buddhism. The Tai-Khamtis are the largest *Theravada* Buddhist community of Arunachal Pradesh. The paper attempts to glean on the *Theravada* Buddhism among the Tai-Khamtis living in present day Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The methodology followed in the paper is both historical and analytical. The study reveals that *Theravada* Buddhism forms an integral part of the life and culture of the Tai-Khamtis. They are the follower of *Theravada* form of Buddhism after Burmese (Myanmarees) tradition. Their tangible and intangible cultural heritage bears traits of South-East Asian culture. The religious belief and practices of the Tai-Khamtis are more or less similar to those of the Buddhists of South-East Asia. The study of the *Theravada* Buddhism is significant to appreciate India's relations with South-East Asian countries in a proper perspective.

Keywords: Community, Tai-Khamtis, North-East India, South-East Asia, *Theravada*

Located in the eastern most part of India, North-East India includes eight states namely, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland,

Sikkim and Tripura. The region is a house of as many as 100 major tribes and a number of sub-tribes having distinct identity, cultural pattern and way of life. Among the ethnic communities of the region the Sherpas, Monpas, Sherdukpens, Khambas, Membas, Nahs, Meyors, Zakhrings etc are followers of *Mahayana* form of Buddhism while the Tai-Khamtis, Tai-Phakeys, Tai-Khamyangs, Tai-Turungs, Tai-Aitons, Singphos, Tikhak Tangsas, Chakmas, Moghs, Boruahs etc are followers of *Theravada* form of Buddhism. The Tai-Khamtis are one of the significant ethnic communities of North-East India professing *Theravada* form of Buddhism.

The Tai-Khamtis belong to the Shan stock of the Tai race. The word Khamti is the composition of two words, i.e. 'kham' and 'ti' means gold and place respectively. The Tai-Khamtis were originally immigrants from Bor-Khamti, the mountainous region which interposes between the eastern extremity of Assam and the valley of the Irrawaddy (Mackenzie, A, 1884, p.57). They entered into erstwhile Assam towards the end of the 18th century, following the dismemberment of their original kingdom of Pong or Mung Kang (Mugaung) in Burma and first settled at Tengapani with the permission from the contemporary Ahom King *Surempha* alias Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769 A.D). When the British took over the administration of Assam, they found the Tai-Khamtis controlling the Sadiya tract. The authority of the East India Company recognized their chief Chou Salan Sadiya *Khowa Gohain* as the local officer of the Assam Government. At present, the Tai-Khamtis are mainly concentrated in Namsai, Changlang and Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. Small groups of their population are inhabited in Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh districts of Assam.

The *Buranjis* (chronicles of the Ahoms) of medieval Assam don't refer to the religion of the Tai-Khamtis. However, the writings of the British explorers, travellers, military officers and administrators throw lights on the religion and belief and practices of the Tai-Khamtis of North-East India.

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History of the *Theravada* Buddhism among the Tai-Khamtis

The Tai-Khamtis are pure Buddhist (Mitchel, John F, 1883, p.130) professing *Theravada* form after Burmese tradition. They are professing Buddhists of the Burmese type of that religion (Waddel, L.A, 1901, p.47). While writing to the Khamtis, John Butler in 1847 A.D, pointed out the prevalence of Buddhism in their society. The observation of E.T. Dalton in 1872 A.D merits a mention here. He precisely stated that the Khamtis are Buddhist having regular establishments of priests and they are advanced tribe in terms of knowledge, arts and civilization. In 1879 A.D, W.W. Hunter in his work '*Statistical Account of Assam*' focused on the sentiment of Dalton.

A host of foreign writers such as T.T. Cooper (1873 A.D), John F. Mitchell (1883 A.D), A. Mackenzie (1884 A.D), J. Errol Gray (1893 A.D), L.W. Shakespear (1904 A.D) and a few reports of British Political officers of Sadiya Frontier Zone have categorically mentioned about the prevalence of Buddhism and Buddhist establishment among the Tai-Khamtis in 19th and early part of the 20th century A.D. The study of the British writings reveals that *Theravada* Buddhism among the Khamtis is more or less similar to those of the Buddhists of South-East Asia. Moreover, it also states that *Theravada* Buddhism among the Tai-Khamtis is not in pure form. Towards the end of the 19th century A.D, Buddhism among the Tai-Khamtis was a curious blend of Buddhism and indigenous faith.

Theravada form of Buddhism among the Tai-Khamtis had its root in the past. When they immigrated to erstwhile Assam in the late eighteen century, they were said to have brought the faith with them. As per their traditional belief, they were influenced by *Theravada* form of Buddhism in the 3rd century A.D while in upper Burma. Historical records refer to the deputation of Sona and Uttara to propagate Buddhism in Burma after the Third Buddhist Council, held during the reign of Asoka (Rao, Manjushree, 1995, p.4). Except the Ahoms, the other Tai groups were *Thervada* Buddhist before their arrival in Assam and maintained their faith till today (Mishra, N and Sahai, Sacchidananda, 2007, p.172). Thus, literary sources reveal the fact beyond doubt that they brought *Theravada* Buddhism from their original homeland, Pong or Mugaong in Burma (Myanmar).

Theravada form of Buddhism is deeply rooted among the Tai-Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The Buddhist missionaries from South-East Asian countries (mainly from Burma) were instrumental in popularizing the faith among the Tai-Khamtis and other communities

of north-east India. Amongst the Buddhist monks, the most important person who had played a pioneering role in spreading Buddhist teaching among the Khamtis and other tribes of Tai origin was Rev. Pien Duin Chow Chrado alias Siradow. It was on July 1882 A. D, Siradow left Burma (Myanmar) and came to the eastern frontier of erstwhile Assam for propagation of Buddhism among the Tai-Khamtis and Singphos. At the initiation of Siradow two ordination temples, one at Chowkham in present day Arunachal Pradesh and another at Borpakey village of Assam were constructed in 1892 A.D. It is reported that Siradow credited to have popularized the faith having at least a monastery in every village of the area (Tripathy, B and Dutta, S, 2007, p.229). A host of Burmese monks who were said to be the disciples of Siradow came with huge consignment of religious scripts and settled in the Tai-Khamti villages to popularize *Theravada* faith after Burmese tradition.

Taking the above literary evidences into account, it may be concluded without hesitation that the Tai-Khamtis of North-East India brought with them *Theravada* school of Buddhism from Burma and practising it since the establishment of their settlements in the region.

Theravada Buddhist Monuments

Monasteries and *stupas* are the *Theravada* Buddhist monuments noticed in the Tai-Khamtis habitats. *Theravada* Buddhist communities refer monastery (*vihara*) to *kyong* or *chong* or *Bapuchang*. Sometimes the proper temple is called *kyong*. To be a full-fledged Buddhist monastery, it needs some essential structural requisites within a monastery compound which includes temple (*kyong*), chamber (*kuti*) for monks (*bhikku*), and novices (*samaneras*), number of rest houses (*sarap*) for male and female devotees (*upasak* and *upasika*), *chedi* or *chedi kongmu* (*ceitya*), *Bodhi* tree (*tun-pothi*), entrance gate (*chingputu*), temple bell (*kese*), well (*nong*); a flower garden (*chiun mok ya*); and so on.

In general, the Buddhist monasteries of the Tai-Khamtis are built in eastern part of the villages near water sources. The Tai-Khamtis monastic compound is very impressive with spacious and airy monastery normally located in the midst of the campus. The village monasteries consist of a single building inhabited by its chief monk several other monks and a small number of temple boys (*mong yangs*). An attractive feature in Buddhist villages is the sacred Buddhist *viharas* with its unique architectural design very differ from the villager's house in terms of architecture and orientation. The villagers built their

houses in the immediate vicinity of the monastery so that monks could receive required hospitalities from the householders. Instances from Thailand indicate to this aspect, when it is told that the Buddhist monasteries have to be built at a distance of at least 1.5 miles from the next so that there would be sufficient householders in the vicinity of the monastery to assure that the monks would receive enough food on their daily alms round (Heinze, Ruth Inge, 1976, p.116). The outward form of the monasteries sometimes looks like the Burmese *Pagodas*. Noticeable thing inside the prayer hall is the altar (*plang*), where the idols of Buddha in various shapes and sizes made of marble stone, bronze, silver, brass and ivory are kept along with a few idols of Goddess Earth *Vasundhari* (*nang wasungtuli*). Located in the eastern direction of the prayer hall, the altar is an elevated area where the idols are kept in an arranged order. The biggest idol is placed in the middle position while the other idols are kept in the sequence manner in the right, left and front line. In front of the altar (*plang*) is the place reserved for the monks to deliver sermons and religious teachings.

The images are kept facing to the east, as it is believed to the right direction in which Gautam received enlightenment under a *Bodhi* tree. The idols of Lord Buddha are shown in touching the earth (*bhumisparsa mudra*), spreading the message of Buddhism and Buddha in seeking alms (*Fra siwri*). The Tai-Khamtis believed that worship of *Fra siwali* or *Fra siwri* (Buddha in begging mood) may gain material prosperity. Verrier Elwin has mentioned about the artistic skill of the Khamtis in carving images of Buddha and some of these hidden in small temples which according to him are of singular grace and beauty (Elwin, Verrier, 1959, p.85). In 1895 A.D, P.R. Gurdon noticed holy books as well as brass and stone images of Buddha, which were kept in the prayer house of some Khamti monasteries and further observed that women were not allowed to enter the '*Bapughar*' (Gurdon, P.R.T, 1895, Pp.157-163). The term '*Bapughar*' refers to the *kuti*, the residence of the monks.

Monastery

The most attractive feature in Tai-Khamtis villages is the sacred Buddhist monastery with its unique architectural design, very different from the villager's houses and neighbouring Assamese Hindu temples (Dutta, S and Tripathy, B, 2006, Pp.161-162). The land of the monastery officially belongs to the *sangha* (Suryabangshi, Luang, 1954, p.84) and once it is used for the temple (*kyong*), the land cannot be used for any other purpose but for paddy

production. The similar custom is found among the Thai of Thailand (Wells, K.E, 1939, p.5).

All structural components within the monastery compound (*wang chong*) are constructed, renovated and maintained by the villagers. Most of them are built of concrete materials except the monks *kuti* and the kitchen (*huein tang khao*), which are either of wood or of bamboo materials. Monastery compounds are fenced with bamboo, yet again the temple compounds are well fenced around to keep it as a sacred place from the rest of the structures of the monastery.

Any visitors, once enter the Tai Buddhist monastery, may find its monastery yard covered with sand (*sai*). It is not only in case of north-east India but also seen in the Tai Buddhist monastery compounds of South-East Asia (Ismail, Mohamad, Yusoff, 1983, Pp.356-357). The laities always expect that the *Bhikkhus* feet should not get wet and muddy when they come to the temple from their chamber (*kuti*) or when they loiter within the compound. In practice, it is a mark to show respect to the *Bhikkhus* by the devotees. Similar traditional custom is found to be practised by Thais and Siamese (Heinz, Ruth-Inge, 1976, p.223).

Sima or *Sampu kathing*

It is an important edifice being situated within the consecrated area marked by boundary stones, used for activities relating to disciplinary affairs of the *Sangha* (Kondinya, 1986, Pp.21-22). *Sima* is a technical term, denoting the official boundary of the *Upasatha* hall, a place where the *Sangha* performs official business such as recitation of *patimokha* or ordinations.

Streamer (*Tan-Khon*)

An attraction in the Tai-Khamti monastery is hand woven embroidered long cloth called *tan-khon* varied in length and breadth, and used in socio-religious ceremonies. Usually, the *tan-khon* adorned the monastery compound are attached to a top of a bamboo pole, slightly tapered in the top and when the air moves it leans both side alternately. Similar types of streamers in some form are to be found near Buddhist temples in Burma (Milne, Leslie, 1910, Pp.122-123). Villagers weave *tan-khon* seeking merit (*akeo*), welfare, long-life, quick recovery from illness and as remembrance of their dead relatives and friends. In 1910 A.D, Leslie Milne reported that among the Shans of Burma, during the festive occasions, women prepare great streamers, which, when attached to bamboos, are raised in remembrance of dead relatives or friends (Milne, Leslie,

1910, Pp.122-123). *Tan-khon* is made of cotton cloth with varieties of flowery geometrical designs. Sometimes, it is embroidered with elaborate designs of pagoda, Bodhi tree, portrait of Lord Buddha, eight essential requirements of a monk, figures of boat, boat man, lotus, fish, bird, flower and so on. *Tan-Khon* is widely used during *poi-Sangken*, *Buddha Jayanti*, *Poi-potwa*, *poi-lu-petecha*, *poi-lu-kongmu*, *poi-lu-Fra*, *poi-leng* and other religious ceremonies. On the festive occasions, it is carried by male members especially during religious processions while women folk walk behind it singing devotional songs and sprinkle puffed rice, flowers, coins etc over it.

Temple (*Kyong or chong or bapuchang*)

One of the attractive structures in Tai Buddhist villages is the temple, which they called *kyong or chong or bapuchang* the literal meaning is a sacred place of worship of the Lord Buddha. They call it *chang (chong)* to denote the whole area of the monastery compound like the Thai of Thailand (Tonyai, Rafawongse Tongnoi, 1972, p.83). The term '*Bapu chang*' is an Assamese appellation of Buddhist temple; it is to denote the abode of the *Bapu* (monk).

The surroundings of the temple are well fenced and the villagers regard it as the consecrated areas of the monastery compound. In the temple, one can notice in the altar (*plang*) a numbers of idols of Lord Buddha in various shapes and sizes along with the images of Goddess *Vasundhara (Nang Wasungtuli)*. The altar (*plang*) is adorned with numbers of flower vases and streamers (*tan-khons*). One of the attractions of the altar (*plang*) is the decorated canopies hang over it which is presumably a recent introduction in Tai Buddhist temples (Buragohain, Jaya, 2006, p.166).

Monk

Monks are an intregal part of the monastery. They are known as '*bhikkhu*' (p) or '*bhikkhus*' (s) desiderative of religious mendicant (Heinz, Ruth-Inge, 1976, p.204). The term is derived from '*bhikkha*' (p) meaning alms. A Buddhist monk or *Bhikkhu* lives on alms food. S.J.Tambiah gives his impression on the term *bhikkhu* that '*bhikkhus*' means one who is without possession and lives on alms. Other closely associate concepts are *nirgantha* (without ties), *vairagi* (free from affection)' (Tambiah, S.J, 1970, p.63). The *bhikkhus* are submissive and obedient to the principles of *Vinayapitaka* which contains the 227 training rules for the *Bhikkhus*. As per the Buddhistic religious custom, the *Bhikkhus* do not beg for food when they are

on their alms-round in villages in the morning. They never give any indication, not even a sign of request for food by ward, action or gesture. Rather, they accept whatever food offered to them by the laity (Dutta, S and Tripathy, B, 2006, p.167). At present, monks of the monasteries are provided food and other materials of sustinence by the respective villagers collectively or on rotation basis of the householders.

The social life of the Khamtis revolves round the monastery. The monks are the most revered persons in the *Theravada* Buddhist societies. Among the Tai-Khamtis their position is just next to the *Raja* and they are of more importance than the village headman (*chow maan*). The monks, particularly the *Mahatheras* are the 'authority' in the Buddhistic religious matters, either in public or in private. In religious matters, both the monks and laities are so interdependent that without either of them the socio- religious life of the Tai-Khamtis remains out of gear.

Kuti

One of the important structures in the *Theravada* Buddhist monastery is the *kuti*, residence of the monks and *sameneras* (novices). The word '*kuti*' originated from *Pali* which denotes the monks living cubicle. According to its tradition, the word '*kuti*' is used for a wooden structure that stands on stilts but may be extended to any type of residence for a *bhikkhu*. More than one century ago, Dalton has mentioned about the priest quarter of the Khamtis which are elaborately carved and made of timber and thatch. At present, however, due to change in material culture and life style instead of thatch C.I. sheets are used for roofing.

Within the monastery ground, all building relating to religious purpose such as temple, rest house, *kongmu*, *kuti* etc. are being constructed by the village laities. According to Buddhist rules, the monks do not construct residential houses or any building for themselves. Such matters are entirely concern of the villagers. The *Kutis* serves the purpose of an educational centre where *samaneras* are taught to read and write Burmese alphabet besides Pali and Tai languages. The *Kuti* provides a good opportunity for those who enter monastery as *samanera* to learn Tai language from their preceptors. In the past, such educational facilities were available only in monks' *kuti*. The monks play the role of the teacher. Although women are not allowed to enter the monk's *kuti*, women along with their family members can pay visit to monks' *kuti*. Such type of family attachment is found among the Thais of Thailand (Tambiah S.J, 1970, p.141).

Thus, monastery, monks, temple and *kuti* form an essential part of the religious life of the Tai-Khamtis

invariably having their importance and significance. *Theravada* Buddhist monastery plays an important role in the economic, socio-cultural and religious life of the Khamtis. One can't expect a Tai-Khamti village without monastery and monk. The monk is the friend, philosopher and guide of the Khamti society. For nothing can be done in the Buddhist area without the propitious indulgence of the priests. The material cultural heritage of the Khamtis is gleaned in their traditional arts and crafts. In the field of art and crafts, the monks and the monasteries play a significant role. The narratives of 19th century British writers focus the role that played by the monks of the monasteries in producing devout artist like wood carvers, ivory carvers, mask makers, paper makers, and painters and so on. The Tai-Khamtis used to make embossed shields and are fond of masks, mainly of horror type, for use in ceremonial dances and other religious themes. Verrier Elwin has praised the carving of wooden images of Lord Buddha by the Khamtis, which according to him, are of singular grace and beauty. James Butler (1847) and William Robinson (1841) had lavishly praised metal works of the Tai-Khamtis particularly their skillful works in iron and silver.

Monasteries not only cater to the religious and spiritual aspirations, but also serve the purpose of social and economic needs of the society. Earlier, the monastic schools were the only schools in the Khamti villages where the monks served as the school master. Although the education in the Buddhist monasteries was religious oriented, students were taught other branches of study like fine art, handicraft, painting, mask making, metallurgy and so on. Physical educations such as judo, martial art, meditation etc are also taught to the students and laymen. The art of manuscript painting is prevalent among them and at present, most of the monasteries in the region have preserved a number Tai manuscript. A good number of printed painting depicting tales of Jataka stories with legends in Tai language are found. The institutions serve as scriptorium for the illustration and copying the manuscript, work for casting images, painting murals and other respiratory for priceless work of art. The monasteries serve as the pavilion of traditional games and sports. It is a centre of performing art where traditional dramas (*pungs*) are staged, dances are performed and musics are played. The monasteries still acted as a centre of religion, culture and learning, an institution of social control, although it has lost its political influence which it held earlier.

Buddhist *stupa*

Archaeological explorations and excavations have unearthed a few Buddhist *stupas* of Arunachal Pradesh, both belonging to *Theravada* and *Mahayana* sects. As far as *stupas* of *Theravada* sect is concerned, the most notable one is that noticed at a place called Vijoyanagar in the district of Changlang near the Indo-Burma border. Y.A. Raikar provides an interesting account of it. The excavation of the site had yielded a good number of antiquities including metal images of Buddha, made of quartz, amber, steatite, clay besides small metal images of alloy numbering fifty (Raikar, Y.A, 1977, Pp.17-19). These images can be categorized into two groups- the large ones have a replica of the *stupa* on the reverse and the smaller ones bear a pointed vertical column at the back. One interesting point to observe in these images is that all of them have the curious hornlike protuberance on the crown of the head, tapering to a point, which is typical of the images of Burma and Siam (Hazra, Kanai Lal, 2000, Pp.468-484). A few potsherds and an octagonal silver coin of the Ahom king Gaurinath Singha (1780-1795A.D.) are being reported from the site. The whole edifice of Vijoyanagar is a modest work of architecture. Stylistically the *stupa* may be compared with the medieval *stupas* of Hmawza and Pagan of Burma and adjoining Thailand area (Chatterjee, B, 1986, Pp.223-230).

There were two Buddhist *stupas* of 19th century A.D, one at Chowkham and another at Lathow in Namsai District noticed earlier, which have been completely washed away by the Bareng and Tengapani river respectively (Tripathy, B and Dutta, S, 2008, p.238). Another brick built *stupa* can be found at Namsai which is of modest type and built after the independence. A small *stupa* is noticed at Lathow village, known as Lathow Buddhist *stupa* situated 12km from Namsai which was built in 1939 A.D.

Among modern *stupas*, a big *stupa* has been constructed on 10 March 1990 A.D at Chowkham by Chow Khamoon Gohain. Another colossal magnificent *stupa* can be seen at *Namsai Paryati Biddhist Sasana*, which was built in 1997 A.D, and the architecture reflects those of Burmese and Thai Buddhist *stupa* (Tripathy, B and Dutta, S, 2008, p.238). Besides, a number of Buddhist monasteries are noticed at Chowkham, Sulongtoo, Empong, Dachuk, Momong, Manmow and other places in the district of Namsai invariably have votive *stupas* associated within the monastery complex. The Chowkham monastery has at least a dozen of votive *stupas* in its vicinity of early 20th century A.D. Besides monasteries, the area has votive *stupas* which are the *Theravada* Buddhist cultural heritage of the Tai-Khamtis. From archeological point of

view, these modern *stupas* are not much of importance but it focuses the living traditions of Buddhist *stupas* in the region.

Although the majority of the monasteries and *stupas* are built after Independence, their importance cannot be minimized as far as religious history of the Tai-Khamtis is concerned. Of the modern monasteries, the *Golden Pagoda* located in a hillock at Tengapani near Chowkham is the finest one in its design and beauty. It was formally inaugurated in February, 2010. The monastery with a specious compound includes a beautiful *stupa*, a *kyong*, a *kyong fra* (shift house), a prayer hall, replica of Asoka pillar, a library cum guest house, monks *kutis*, typical Tai-Khamti houses, and a beautiful flower garden with ornamental trees has become an important tourist spot. The green idol of Buddha, world second highest bamboo statue of Buddha, figures of *Wasungtuli*, mural paintings are the attraction of the monastery.

In retrospect, the structural components of *Theravada* Buddhist monastery includes *kyong* (temple), *kongmu* (*stupa*), *kuti* (monk's residence), *sima* or *sampu kathing* (boundary stone), *kyong fra* (shift house, a small building to house the idols of Buddha during *Sangken* festival) and *ching ya* (dwelling for old women during *neo-wa*). Besides *tan-khon* (streamer), *ton-puthi* (Bodhi tree), *kyasi-fra* or *hangling* (a boat like wooden structure used in *kyong Fra* during *sangken*), *long kong* (a kind of water shower used in *kyong fra* during *sangken*), *chingputu* (entrance gate) etc form the basic elements of the monasteries. In addition to the idols made of bronze, brass, wood, marble stone and ivory, the monasteries have been preserving religious manuscripts and traditional musical items to cater to cultural needs of the society. Keeping of Hindu goddess *Vasundhara* (*Nang Wasungtuli* or *Vasungtuli*) to witness the offering of any meritorious works in every monastery is an interesting aspect of Tai-Khamti Buddhist religious practices. Some of the monasteries are running schools where Pali and Tai language are taught to students especially to the boys of poor family free of cost.

Theravada Buddhist festivals

Most of the festivals and ceremonies of the Tai-Khamtis are commemorative in nature of some events in the life of Buddha which are tied up with the cycle of the lunar months round the year. Therefore, taking the religious view into account, a brief account of their cycle of festivals is given below.

Poi- Sangken (Sangken festival)

The *Sangken* or *Samkyen* (origin *samkranti*) is the New Year festival of the Tai-Khamtis, celebrated in the month of *noun-ha*, corresponded to mid April (13th-15th April). The festival is celebrated by the Buddhist of South India, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. In northern Thailand this festival is known as *pi mai*, while in central Thailand it is known as *Prophenie Songkran* or *Maha Songkran* (Duangthip, Rungkarn, 2006, p.75). In this festival, the idols of Buddha are brought to the temporary shrine, *chong fra* (shift house) and people pour water on them. The festival is celebrated for three days. The process of washing the Buddha idols during the *Sangken* festival is known as *chon fra*. During the days of *Sangken*, younger persons put water on the feet of monks, other respected persons and their parents seeking blessing from them. Boys and girls splash water to each other. During the celebration, *Buddhi-tree* (*ton puthikham*), *kongmu* (*stupa*), *Chow sangpha-upuk* and the *Sammuk-kathing* are also given ceremonial wash by splashing water on it.

Observation of this festival is considered an act of merit making mixed with boisterous fun of throwing water to each other, playing with mud and *mimo* (dark ashes of cooking pots). The festival is marked by paying homage to *Triratna* and observance of *pancha-sila*, listening to religious discussion especially by the elders.

Poi Puthi Kham (Buddha Jayanti)

Poi puthi kham is celebrated in the full moon day of *Vaisakha* corresponding to April-May to commemorate the important date's relating to the life of Lord Buddha. This is the day on which the Buddha was born, attained enlightenment and got *Mahaparinirvana*. The Khamtis observed this day with religious enthusiasm and solemnity. This is the day when people remember the great life of the Buddha, his message of non-violence, love and peace and receive inspiration.

Neo-wa (varsavasa)

The festival starts from the full moon day of *naunpet* (July-August) to full moon day of *naun-sip-et* (October-November). This three month lent period is called by the Buddhists as *vassavasa* (*Khamti.Neo-wa* or *Neo-wa*). During this period, the monks do not go for travel, remain at their home monastery and spend their time on studies and meditations. This is a restricted season for the laymen. Secular activities such as marriage, construction of house,

public entertainment etc. are avoided during the period. People observe fasting in some auspicious days during the period. During this period, the laymen try to observe Buddhist principles at best.

Sitang Khao-wa or Sitang Hoo

It is the first *sitang* (an auspicious religious day) of the *neo-wa* period, celebrated in the full moon day of *lin-pet* (July-August). With the beginning of the *sitang*, a monk cannot go out of the village even for a single night. He is bound to remain in his respective monastery till the completion of the *neo-wa* period. People offer donations in form of sweets, cakes, food items and all articles which are necessary for the monks' day to day life. Mass prayer is held, the laities take *pancha-shila* and *astashila*, monks deliver their sermons and religious discussions are held. The process of worship is repeated on all the days of *sitang*. The old men and women who observe *astashila* remained in respective dormitories within the monastery compound called *ching-pu* and *ching-ya* respectively, where chanting religious verses by counting beads in their hands forms popular practice among them.

Sitang Chaley

It is an important *sitang* of the *neo-wa* period observed in the full moon day of *lin-kao* (September-October). The day is marked by communal prayer and offering to monks. On this day, people try to surpass others in terms of donation both in cash and kind. To feed the hungry and poor is considered meritorious work to earn happiness in this life and hereafter (Bordoloi, M.N., 1968, p.28).

Sitang Me-Pi

The *sitang* is observed in the Tai-Khamti lunar month of *lin-sip* (October-november). This *sitang* falls in the no moon day. Mass bath is held in the morning before sunrise. On the eve of the *sitang*, the Tai-Khamtis hang the thorny branches of Chinese date plum (*Zizyphus Jujuba*) on the doors of their building, by doing this; they believe the evil spirit cannot enter their houses. To tie up the trees and creepers with a rope of straw on that day is their tradition which is done with a hope of bumper harvest for the year. As usual, day long religious programme is held in the monastery.

Sitang ok-wa

This is the last celebration of the *sitang* during the *neo-wa* period observed in the month of *lin-sip-et* (October-November). It is celebrated for consecutive two days. The last day is, infact, the velidactory occasion for the monks because it is to get a count of the number of years of mendicancy of a monk. This *sitang* is marked by various cultural programmes. It is observed to remember that Lord Buddha's disciples did meditation for three months during the rain. The ritual followed immediately after *pot-wa* is the *kanto chow mun* or *kanto sara* which is considered as a part of the *poi pot-wa*. Just after one or two days of *pot-wa*, the junior monks along with the villagers proceed to the senior monks of neighbouring villages with a view to show their allegiance and respect to their teacher (*Chow sara*). It is customary to pay visit first to the village where the senior most monk resides. The junior monk leads the party of his village. At the time of the visit they are accompanied by musical party that goes on beating drums, gong, and cymbal etc and have communal prayer in the concerned monastery.

Poi Kathing

The festival is held in the last month of the Tai-Khamtis lunar calendar *lin-sip song* (Nov-Dec.). The end of the retreat is marked by *kathing* ceremony, which in its classical sense means the distribution of robes by lay donors to the monks for their use in the year commencing after the retreat. That is the occasion when the monks and novices are presented with robes and gifts, thereafter, the monks are free to resume lay life. The *kathing* (*kathina*) presentation is an old Buddhist tradition (Tambiah, S.J., 1970, p.157). As it is the robe offering ceremony to the monks, the work of weaving and dyeing of the robes has to be finished within a night. According to their tradition, cotton had to be ginned, formed into rolls, spun, woven into cloth, dyed and sewn in the same night. The process is very difficult. Therefore, the festival is called *Kathing* which is said to have derived from Pali word *kathin* meaning difficult.

In the *kathing* celebration, new robes, useful goods and money are given to the monasteries. Usually, the *patesa*, desire giving tree or money tree *ton-ngeon* (Tambiah, S.J., 1970, p.159) is also presented to the monks on this occasion. The focal act is the donation of patches of cloth which the monk dye and make into a special robe, during the same day, commemorating the robes made from sewn-together rags in early Buddhism. This highly

auspicious ceremony, held at most local *viharas*, complete the annual round of the more important festivals in Southern Buddhism (Harvey, Peter, 2017, p.261).

The work of making *civara* (*sangkan-kathing*) finishes by the sunrise. In the morning, villagers assemble in the monastery, where after ritualistic performance it is donated to the monks. The *kathing* ceremony then concluded with the monks and novices chanting a blessing appropriate after receiving gifts.

Mai ko sum phai or Poi phung phai

The festival falls on the full moon day of *lin-saam* (February-March) corresponding to the Hindu's *phalguna purnima*. The festival is associated with the life of Lord Buddha. The term *maiko sum phai* in Tai-Khamti means putting of wooden stacks into fire. The shape of the structure of the *mai ko* is triangular or pentagonal, heptagonal or octagonal, synchronizing *tri ratna*, *panchasila*, *sapta Buddhanga* and *astangik marga* of Buddhist philosophy. The altar (*plang*) of the *mai ko* is made of the planks of babana tree. The top of the *maiku* is adorned with a conical shaped crown called *Thi or Ho-cheng* made of bamboo stripes and coloured papers. People celebrated this festival to offer warm to the monks to get happy and prosperous year and to mark the farewell to the winter. In the evening of the day, people invite the monks and offer with prayer the *mai ko* to Buddha. The festival is marked by a community feast in the evening and preparation of a kind of food item called *khao yaku*. Climbing hill on the day is a popular custom related to this festival.

Poi lin-si-topong

The festival is celebrated to mark an event distantly connected with the life of Gautama. On this day, it is believed that any kind of gifts earns happiness for the donor in and after life. On this occasion *stupas* (*kongmus*), shrines, monuments are renovated, reburnished, new one built. The speciality of the *poi* is that on this day people make sand *pagodas* in numbers within the monastery compound and it is dedicated in the evening by burning of innumerable candles, incense sticks and followed by community prayer. *Boddhi tree*, *stupas* and monuments are illuminated by burning of lamps. In addition to sand pagoda people make tank, boat, granary, cowshed, etc in sand and decorated them with flowers, candles and *tan-khons* (steamers). According to traditional belief, the number of sand pagoda should be eighty four thousand (*pet-mumn-si-heing*).

Poi Khamsang

Poi Khamsang is an important religious festival of the Tai-Khamtis relating to the ordination of a novice. In case of ordination of a monk, the term *poi kham chao mun* is applied. The ordination ceremony is held in an auspicious day. On the day of ordination, a wouldbe have his head shaved, wear white dress and observes eight precepts from the head monk and practice counting beads and meditation in the monastery. The boy has to take an oath under senior monks. A chapter of a minimum of five monks is necessary to validate the ordination. The ordination is held by dark. In the evening, cultural programmes including staging of drama (*pung*) are being held. The programme of the *khamsang* lasted for three consecutive days. The last day's programme includes community prayer in the monastery; taking of *panchasila*, religious discussion, community feast etc.

Poileng

Poileng is one of the most important festivals of the Tai-Khamtis. The Tai-Khamtis celebrated *poileng* festival on the occasion of a prominent monk's death. The word '*poileng*' derives from two words i.e. '*poi*' and '*leng*'. '*poi*' means festival and '*leng*' means chariot. So, the festival is known as the chariot festival. In this ceremony, a chariot is made from wood which is beautifully decorated with colourful patterns and designs to carry the corpse of the deceased monk. The cremation ceremony is marked by the pulling of chariot, religious prayer and discussions, playing traditional performing art (*pya pung*), exhibition, playing traditional games etc. Pulling of chariot and the game of tug of war between men and women where women are expected to get win is an important part of *poi leng* celebration. *Poileng* is a festival that unites the Tai-Khamtis under one umbrella and strong social solidarity are seen among them during the celebration of the *poileng* festival.

Besides above mentioned festivals, the Tai-Khamtis observed many religious festivals such as *poi lu kongmu* (festival of dedication of stupa), *poi lu Fra* (dedication of the idols of Buddha), *poi lu kyong* (dedication of monastery), *poi lu lik* (dedication of religious books) etc which focus the cultural heritage of the community. They have a number of dances, dramas (*pungs*) which are performed during the festival. The social and cultural life of the Tai-Khamtis find an illuminating expression through the ceremonies and festivals they observe on different occasions throughout the year. It is observed

that on each festival and merit making ceremonies, the Khamtis propitiate the Buddha by offering food, flowers, candles and incense sticks in the *chong* (monastery) to earn merit which is the way to attain *Nibbana* and until then for prosperity in present life.

Theravada Buddhist Painting

The art of painting is in practice amongst the Buddhist communities of North-East India. The paintings of the Tai-Khamtis are located in manuscripts and monasteries. It is reported that they used gold paint for painting and writing of important manuscripts. The monks of the monastery, who in the time of relax were fond of artistic work including painting. The Shan style of painting is being practiced by the Buddhist monks in Khamti dominated areas of Arunachal Pradesh (Das Gupta, Rajatananda, 1982, p.103).

Theravada Buddhism and the Tai-Khamtis are inseparable. *Theravada* Buddhism plays an important role in their socio-cultural life and influenced their day to day life. In the days of modernization and globalization the Tai-Khamtis still preserve and follow the *Theravada* Buddhist philosophy in the north-eastern part of India is matter of pride to the Buddhist world. It is to be noted that the Tai-Khamtis are the true followers of *Theravada* Buddhism and they have kept their religious identity intact, till now. *Theravada* Buddhism serves as a bulwark against the growing conversion of the tribals to Christianity in the easternmost frontier of India. A survey of the *Theravada* Buddhist belief and practices of the Tai-Khamtis reveals that they follow various practices which are more or less similar to those of the Buddhists of South-East Asia. The socio-cultural life as well as the religious life of the Tai-Khamtis is influenced by South-East Asian culture. The influence of Myanmar and Thai art and architecture is visible in their monuments such as *stupa* (*kongmu*), monastery (*kyong* or *chong*), *kyongfra* (shift house) etc. Living Buddhism is a part and parcel of Indian culture. Both India and South-East Asia have a shared cultural heritage. The study of the *Theravada* Buddhism is significant to appreciate India's relations with South-East Asian countries in a proper perspective.

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Suriyabongs, Luang., *Buddhism in Modern Thailand*, Bangkok, 1954, p.84., *Sangha* is collective noun which means community of *Bhikkhus*. In its widest sense the term '*Sangha*' includes all bonafied *bhikkhus* of whatever sect, they belong to, whatever in the world they may be, i.e. the world wide community of *bhikkhus*. But in a narrow sense it refers to the number of *bhikkhus* necessary, according to *Vinaya* or discipline to carry out official action of the *Sangha* including ordination (*uposampoda*) or a formal meeting of the order. See Rafawongse Tongnoi Tongyai *Wat Bovoranivas Vihara*, Siva Phorn Ltd. Bangkok, Thailand, 1972, p.83.

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