

BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE KHAMTIS

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ABSTRACT

Religion plays an important role in the socio-cultural life of every individual or group of individuals. Religion is the origin of rites and rituals; the meaning the system of faith and worship shapes one's culture in one way or another. Rites and rituals are most important practices of human culture. They are the expression of manner and type of adjustment effected by people with their concept of supernatural. The Khamtis are a group of tribes living mainly in the Namsai district and adjoining Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh and Lakhimpur district of Assam, most of them professing Buddhism as their religion. Different communities living in North-East India have rich tradition of culture and religion. Among them the Khamtis of North-East India are keeping alive a great Buddhist tradition of Theravada Buddhism. The Khamtis belongs to the Theravada faith of Buddhism who have regular establishment of priests who are well versed in the recondite mysteries of their religion; and a large proportion of the laity can read and write in their own language, having a separate script of their own. This paper tries to highlight the influence of Buddhist Philosophy upon the Khamtis as well as their religious practises based on the essence of Theravada Buddhism in true spirit. This paper aims to present an explanatory analysis based mostly on secondary data, some of them corroborated by primary data collected by the present researcher in consultation with his supervisor.

KEYWORDS: *Theravada Buddhism, Monastery, Buddhist Monk, Philosophy, Buddha*

Article History

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INTRODUCTION

The Khamtis are one of the advanced tribes in Northeast India, mostly concentrated in the Namsai and Changlang Districts of Arunachal Pradesh and Lakhimpur district of Assam. Additionally, a section of the tribe lives across the border, in Myanmar. They belong to the greater *Tai-Shan* group of tribes. According to Dutta Choudhari (1978), the Khamtis migrated from *Bor-Khamti* or *Mung-Khamti* in the Irrawaddy Valley of Burma (now officially known as Myanmar) and settled around the Tengapani River in 1751. Later, a section of them settled in the different places in Sadiya, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, etc. The word 'Khamti' means 'a land full of gold' (*kham* means 'gold' and *ti* means 'place'). The Khamtis are said to be far advanced amongst all the north-eastern frontier tribes in the realms of knowledge, art and civilization. T.T Cooper observed in 1873, "To speak of the Khamtis as a tribe is to do little justice, for there is that about the word 'tribe' which conveys the idea of wildness and want of culture, very far from forming a characteristic of the Khamtis, for from some of their social laws even civilized nations might take a lesson" (Choudhuri: 1978). The community had its own script and the people speak Khamti dialect which belongs to the Tai family of languages. Assamese and English are used for written communication. The Khamti men and women can easily be identified by their dress. The men commonly wear a

tight-fitting cotton *chyn* (jacket) and a cotton or silk *fanoi* (lungi). The lungi has a chequered pattern combination of green, red, violet and black. They also put on a *turban* (headgear). A man of higher status wears the Burmese *pasto* (a piece of multi-colour silk). The female dress consists of a *sein* (black skirt), *khenyao* (long-sleeved jacket), *longwat* (embroidered waist cloth) and a white *turban*. The last two are generally worn by married women.

The Khamtis belong to the *Theravada* or the *Hinayana* sect of the greater Tai-Burmese Buddhist tradition. Each village has a *chong* (monastery), also known as *Buddha vihar*. The *vihars* were adorned with images of Lord Buddha. The community has two types of priest. The first is called *chowsra* (principal monk) and the second is called *chau-mun* (ordinary monk). The priesthood or monk-ship is not hereditary. Anyone can become a *chou-mun* (ordinary monk); but to become a *chowra* (principal monk), one has to study Buddhist philosophy through *Pali* literature and must have minimum 10 years of experience in that capacity. The monks reside in the monastery and receive *som* (food) from the villagers known as *dana* in Sanskrit literature. The monks give religious teachings to the villagers and perform birth, marriage and death rituals of all the families, rich or poor. The Khamtis are devout followers of Buddhism tinged with traditional beliefs and practices.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the present study is to highlight the influence of Buddhist Philosophy upon the *Theravada Buddhism* among the Khamtis as well as their religious practises based on the essence of *Theravada Buddhism* in true spirit. The study also attempts to study the religious practices of the *Bhikkhus* as well as monasticism among the Khamtis.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper is in the form of an explanatory study in analysing the influence of Buddhist Philosophy upon the *Theravada Buddhism* among the Khamtis. The present study is based primarily on primary sources, consisting of 'unstructured interviews'. In this study, 6 respondents have been interviewed to collect required first-hand information. The respondents were the Buddhist monks in the monastery of Barkhamti, Deotula and Barpathar Monastery of Lakhimpur district of Assam and Namsai, Chongkham and Tengapani Monastery in the Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh. Also secondary sources in the form of books, journal, magazine, publications, etc. have been for additional and correlative sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Khamtis, in general, are followers of *Theravada Buddhism*. The Khamtis believed that attainment of *Niravana* or salvation of human soul can be achieved by following the **Noble Eightfold Path** – Right Views, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation, as taught by the Buddha, the Enlightened. The religious life of the Khamtis has been deeply influenced by the Buddhist ethics and morality. To them, Lord Buddha is a great moral preceptor and an embodiment of love and pity, truth and righteousness and in their daily prayers to him, which they call *paiphra*, they seek his blessings for the welfare of the family and of the society as a whole. The man who is devoted to the service for propagation of the teachings of Lord Buddha is called by them *phra-taka* or disciple of God.

Influence of Buddhist Philosophy in Theravada Buddhism

In every Tai-Khamti house a shrine-like *altar* is built at its eastern corner for the performance of prayer and devotion. The aged Tai-Khamtis, who are particularly religious-minded, spend most of their time in prayer and devotion at this eastern-most apartment of their houses. They perform prayer and offer devotion in the name of *Lord Buddha* every morning and evening at this *altar*. Generally, the *altar* is built at the level of average human's head. The *altar* consists of a big shelf for keeping the necessary articles of devotion. Particularly a *vase* containing fresh water and flowers to honour the *Buddha*, are placed here. It is to be noted that food offering is only offered in the Morning Prayer. A household prayer is usually brief and simple which only expresses reverence to the *Triratna*, the three Gems – the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha*. By *Dhamma*, they mean teachings of *Buddha* and the *Sangha* means the upholder and propagation of the *Dhamma*. It is usually recited in the *Pali* language. As an introductory part of the devotion, the devotee recites some words in the name of paying reverence and homage to the *Lord Buddha*. The gist of the recital goes as follows:

*“I beg leave, I beg leave, I leave
By act, by word and by thought,
I raise my hands in reverence to the
Forehead and adore, honour and humbly
Pray homage to three Gems – The Buddha,
The Dhamma, The Sangha, O Buddha”.*

The above sacred recitation performed by the devotee is a kind of religious salutation or solemn expression of his or her pious feelings and faithfulness towards his or her supreme Lord. After the recitation, the devotee would start the main prayer. During the prayer, the devotee again utters another form of recital seeking escape from woes, scourge, enemies, etc. At last, the devotee requests the Supreme Lord to help him or her to attain '*Nibanna*' (or *Nirvana*) – the ultimate goal of a true Buddhist.

The gist of the prayer runs in this way:

“By this act of adoration, may I be free from the four states of woe ('rebirth in hell', 'as an animal', 'as a ghost and as demon'), the three scourges (war, epidemic and famine), the eight wrong circumstances of birth (rebirth in hell as an animal, a ghost, Brahmadeva, a human, remote from human habitation, with heretical views incapable of understanding the Buddhist doctrine), the five enemies (king, thief, fire, water and foe); the four deficiencies (tyrannical kings, wrong views about life after death, physically deformed and dull-witted), and the five misfortunes (lack of relation, wealth, health, proper belief and morality) and may I quickly attain 'Nibbana', O Buddha.”

After the completion of the prayer, the devotee recites the *Triratna* and *Pancha Silas* – the five moral precepts. During the recitation, the devotee pledges adoration to the *Blessed One*, the *Lord Buddha*. The devotee recites *Triratna* and *PanchaSilas* in the following way:

Triratna

- I take refuge in the *Buddha*
- I take refuge in the *Dhamma*
- I take refuge in the *Sangha*

Pancha Silas

- I refrain from killing.
- I refrain from stealing.
- I refrain from lustful misconduct.
- I refrain from telling lie.
- I refrain from taking liquor and other intoxicating substance.

When the recitation of *Triratna* and *Pancha Silas* is over, the devotee proceeds further to perform '*bhavana*' (meditation). During the *bhavana*, the devotee touches his or her beads and recites, '*Anicca*', '*Dukkha*' and '*Anatta*'. Just after the *bhavana*, the devotee usually proceeds further to invoke the '*Vasunduri Devi*' (the earth goddess) through water-libation which the Tai-Khamtis call '*Ye-man*'. It is a pious belief among the Tai-Khamtis that by invoking the earth goddess, the devotee would want her to be the witness of the meritorious acts performed by him or her.

The Khamtis believe that the *Gautama Buddha* occupies the fourth position in the line of the *Buddhas*, the great religious preacher in this world and after five thousand years of his death, he will be succeeded by *Ari Mitiya*, the fifth *Buddha*. The Khamtis do also conceive of a supreme creator, whom they call *Chau-khun-shang* and believe that a god named *Chau-ci-giya*, who is subordinate to the supreme god of creation, looks after the welfare of human beings. There are other gods in the Khamti pantheon, who are invoked in a prayer known as *wai-akyu*.

Religious Practices of the Bikkhus

The word '*Bikkhus*' indicates that the Buddhist monk must live on '*Bhikkha*' or alms. He cannot take anything from home or from his own earning for his own living. They come with begging bowls in hand, roaming from door to door in the village. During the period of '*Vaccavasa*' only, they do not go outside the monastery and the villagers manage to bring the food for them to the monastery. They maintain full restriction in terms of food and cloth. The monks never take any food after midday, i.e. twelve o'clock at noon. They never wear other cloths except the '*civara*' or yellow robe prescribed for the monkhood. A monk must obey the regulations of monkhood or he must leave the monastery.

In their own language the Khamtis call a monk as *Chau-mun* and the novice or the boys newly ordained as *Chou-sang*. They are not bound to stay in the monastery or in the same monastery. As shown by the Lord Buddha himself, they are to meet their colleagues for religious discussions and to attain new knowledge from them. Only during the period of '*vaccavaca*' which is called *Nea-Va* by the Khamtis, they must remain within the same monastery. The '*vaccavaca*' continues for three months every year starting from the '*Asara Purnima*' and ending in the '*Ashina Purnima*', i.e. the period from the full-moon of July to that of October. During this period, the monks must depend upon the people of the same village. They also have to depend on the villages for their necessary robes. The *civara* or yellow robe used by monk

has three parts, namely, 'uttarasanga' or upper garments, 'antara vasa' or inner garments and 'sanghati' or over robe. Without having the full dress with all the three parts, a monk cannot have the full dress with all the three parts, without which a monk cannot move away from the monastery. Those who have no such dress must take some special ritual formula for ten days, as a penance for the violation of *civara* discipline. The Khamtis observe a 'kathinavrata' for one month in which they offer to the monk 'kathing', i.e. a yellow robe. It should be made preferably within one night. Traditionally, if the robe is made within the same day from spinning to stitching, then it is a great merit for the donator of the cloth. Now-a-days, they stitch the robe out of readymade cloth within the same day, or they prepare the cloth in the handloom within one month and stitch it on the same night. This auspicious day falls on the full-moon of November (though they do not follow the Gregorian calendar). From the perspective of the monk also, it is very important to get such a robe. He cannot move outside the monastery for even one night without having a 'Khamti robe'. If one gets it, he need not get outside for five months. Otherwise he must use his ordination robe.

Ordination is of two types. The lower ordination or 'pabbaya', which is called 'kham-chou-sang' in Khamti language, is given to the boys of the minimum age limit of eight years. Then he is called 'samanera' in Pali and *Chau-sang* in Khamti language. The higher ordination or 'upasampada' is called *chau-mun-kham-chauke*. To take this vow, the monk must be of at least twenty years of age and he must have twelve years of experience of monastic life. By the experience of long twelve years, the boy can realize the determination of his own mind and then only he can proceed to accept 'upasampada' or higher ordination. This is a great occasion of his life by which the man enters the *Sangha* of monks. In such a religious function, at least four monks from different monasteries must be present, because it is the rule of Buddhism that *Sangha* must constitute of at least four monks.

To accept monkhood, the person has to fulfil some other conditions also such as that he must not be a slave or in debt to another person, that he must be free from contagious disease/s and has the consent of his parents. He must have general knowledge of Pali language to read the religious books of monastic rules and disciplines. This again proves the psychological impact of their religion. These Theravadians respect the religious rules so earnestly that they wish that a 'Bikkhus' must know Pali so that he can properly understand the rules of monastic disciplines. Of course such lessons were taught to the boys staying in monastery and also to others who come to learn there. Most of the boys in a Khamti village come to the monastery for education, which was the centre of learning. Some of them like to stay with the *Bikkhus* and the novices in the monastery and serve them. These boys are called 'Chang-Khapi' in Khamti language. Thus, the monks even live away from an essential part of a Khamti village. The whole society depends upon the *Bikkhus* for its basis, i.e. education which is not simply formal education of the whole society. Thus the religious preachers of these societies think it more important to teach the villagers about the religious texts than to lead them blindly to perform some rituals.

The monasteries are generally situated at the eastern corner of the village and hence the monks stay outside the direct contact of family life. They never come to settle other families' problems. But this function of building the family as well as the society is done by them whole-heartedly. The monks enter the village only for alms or in connection with some religious function in the household life of the villagers, when they are invited to do so. Even when they enter the village for begging alms, they follow a definite route always at a definite time, because the housewives may wait for them outside the house with rice and curry or whatever they can give to the monks. On other occasions, they come to the village only to guide the householder in a specific religious function. On such occasions, the first thing to do is to recite the vows of 'Pancha-Sila' which they call 'Cinha' and pray for the good of the family. But the monks use a face cover, just like a big fan, made of fine bamboo-strips which is called 'bi-ho-tra' by them. They keep it before them when sitting in a social-

religious function to avoid the sight of forbidden things, especially the women.

On 'Upasatha' days when the villagers come to the temple, the monk, generally the older one of the monastery, recite the *Pancha-Sila* vow to the gathering and lead them in the chanting the prayers. These are done in Pali language in the Khamti villages. The 'Upasatha' is observed once in a week on the full moon, new moon, and the days lying in between these two days which is called 'Asthami' in solar calendar. All their religious functions are held mainly on the day of full-moon. The 'Buddha Purnima' is the most important of all these 'Upasatha' or 'Satang' as they call it. The monks led all the religious functions in public ceremony as well as family rites. The *Bikkhus* of the Khamti society thus perform the duty of spiritual leader. The villagers take him in good respect and think that merit is impossible without his guidance and help. The villagers are called 'dayaka' or 'taka' because they give to the monks their necessities as food, cloth, etc. The pious one of the Khamti village would not take his meal without offering food to the monks. The monks live on the minimum requisites with a devotional attitude. They take food only to sustain the life, cloth only to cover the body and shelter in the monastery is needed for protection and medicine which is essential to recover health for pursuit of devotion. This ideal of living with the minimum necessities is based on the ideal of removal of 'tanha', i.e. extinction of desire which is the main philosophical condition of the ideal of *nibbana*.

The villagers regard the death of a monk as achieving 'Nivan' or 'nipan' (end of desire) as they call it. They keep the body in a separate house which is called 'Chang-Nikpan' for several days. Then the villagers arrange a great function called 'Payalang' in which the dead body is taken out on a chariot of six or eight wheel and the people being divided into two groups draw the chariot on both sides. It is a great occasion for the Buddhists. Villagers from remote areas also would attend such kind of functions. The body is taken to the cremation ground along with a big procession.

Impact of Buddhist Philosophy on Theravada Buddhism

It is the most valuable impact of Buddhist philosophy that it prepares the minds of its followers to accept the fate of death as an intentional goal. The most evident fact of life is that it is essentially related with death. As Martin Heldegger says, human being is essentially temporal. As these existentialists try to accept death fully and frankly, so Buddhist philosophy tried to accept death. Death is inevitable for every one; nobody can take the other's dying away from him. So the only way is to accept death deliberately. Buddhist psychology has that impact upon its true followers because the analysis of the *skandha* theory and its correct understanding can bring that level of mind to accept death authenticity. Each person dies for himself and by himself. Nobody can share death with others. So mortality is the proof of individuality. To accept the fact of death deliberately, the only easy way is to accept the idea of individual salvation, which is the goal of the *Theravadians*. This intentional goal of individual salvation is again possible only through the observance of moral principle.

The life of Buddhist monk is bound by the two hundred twenty seven 'patimokkha' rules. The first four of these rules are called 'parajika' life. These rules forbid sex-relation first. Secondly, a monk should not take anything which is not given freely by somebody to him. He must not destroy any life and should not claim to achieve superiority. These are the fundamental principles of morality. To be moral, sex-life must be regulated and in case of monks it must be completely restricted. Forceful undertakings are another forbidden thing in moral life. *Ahimsa* or non-killing is the basic principle and *nirahamkara* or egoless mentally is the basic need for moral life. The monastic rules govern their behaviour to society to the monks and their mode of life. All the rules are concerned with the regulations on desire, temptation and lust. The teachings of *Theravada Buddhism* are concerned with charity, morality and meditation. The Khamti monasticism tries its best to maintain these characteristics of the religion. The monks recite the *Sila-vows* always along with the prayer. The

laymen take *pancha-sila* whereas the monks and the pious ones follow *astha-sila* vows. They make it in Pali language as follows:

- ‘*Panati Pata Veramani Sikha Padam Samadiyami,*’ or I vow to follow the lesson that I should abstain from killing the living the living creatures;
- ‘*Adinnadana Veramani Sikha Padam Samadiyami,*’ or I vow to follow the lesson that I should abstain from receiving unwilling donations;
- ‘*Kamesumechachera Veramani Sikha Padam Samadiyami,*’ or I vow to follow the lesson that I should abstain from indulging in sexual pleasure and falsehood;
- ‘*Musawada Veramani Sikha Padam Samadiyami,*’ or I vow to follow the lesson that I should abstain from telling lies; and
- ‘*Surameraya Majjapamadatthana Veramani Sikha Padam Samadiyami* or I vow to follow the lesson that I should abstain from taking intoxicating things and wine.
- ‘*Vikala Bhojana Veramani Sikha Padam Samadiyami.*’ or I vow to follow the lesson that I should abstain from taking food untimely, i.e., after 12 noon;
- ‘*Nicca Geeta Vadita Visukadassana Malagandha Vilepana Dharana Vibhuasanatthana Veramani Sikha Padam Samadiyami.*’ or I vow to follow the lesson that I should abstain from dance and musical amusements, from festivities and from using luxuries and adornments; and
- ‘*Ucca Sayana Mahasayana Veramani Sikha Padam Samadiyami,*’ or I vow to follow the lesson that I should abstain from sleeping on comfortable and luxuries bed.”

By these vows the monks remind themselves of their bindings of monastic life. They are so particular in observing the vows that in regard to the first one, the monks observe *neova* staying within the monastery, so that the growing sprouts of summer and low insects of rainy season may not be destroyed by their steps. Sexual rules are most important. After accepting monkhood, he cannot even touch his own mother, even if she should fall in some distress. As true *Theravadian Buddhists*, the Khamtis believe in individual liberation and for this the guidance of the *Bikkhu* is necessary for them. The *Bikkhus* keep themselves away from normal life of the village. When entering the village at a definite time, some boys accompany those giving signals of their arrival so that the women may be cautious and ready to come out with alms.

CONCLUSIONS

The study leads to the conclusion that the religious as well as socio-cultural life of the Khamtis displays a deep impact of Buddhist philosophy. As followers of *Theravada Buddhism*, in most of the villages, one can notice a monastery and people celebrate a number of Buddhist festivals. So it proved that the Khamtis are zealous followers of *Theravada Buddhism*. The teaching of Buddhism helps man to remove selfish interest. The idea of *Anatta* and *Anicca* has its philosophical impact upon the minds of its followers. This idea again leads to love and kindness to everybody. It teaches the lesson of equanimity. All these thoughts have good moral impact upon their character.

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