

## CLASS FORMATION AMONG THE KHAMTIS OF NORTH EAST INDIA: TRADITION AND CHANGE

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Received: **21 Dec 2018**

Accepted : **24 Dec 2018**

Published: **31 Dec 2018**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Change is the law of nature. Society is not a tall a static phenomenon but it is a dynamic entity. Change is not a uniquely modern phenomenon. Some kinds and degrees of social changes are universal in human experience. The study of social changes in north-east India (more particularly among the tribes) attracts the scholars of social sciences because of the existence of colourful groups of population belonging to different races. A custom which is defined as socially sanctioned behaviour of the members of a particular society is transmitted from generation to generation and in the process it undergoes changes in the changed situation. Since the class formation among the different tribes (more particularly in north-east India) in a very broad sense, include moral, legal, religious and other aspects of the custom through which the society is controlled. These also undergo change to cope with the new situation. The north-east India is an India in miniature in terms of diverse colourful groups of population belonging different race and linguistic group with their distinctive culture and tradition. Among them the Khamtis in north-east India are, a Buddhist group belonging to the greater Tai-Shan civilization. Traditionally, the Khamti society is highly stratified and the community is divided into classes with a distinct social and economic status. But as time passed there have been changes that took place among the Khamtis in terms of class division. This paper seeks to examine the tradition and changes in the class formation of the Khamtis, a Buddhist tribe of north east India.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Monastery, Priest, Council, Change*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Society is the web of social relationship. It is an organization, a system of a pattern of relationship among human beings. In the society, the life style of an individual is determined by the social class which he belongs. The critical period of an individual's life affects not only his own family but the society he belongs. North-east India is comprised of diverse colourful groups of populations belonging to different races and groups with their distinctive society and culture. Like other tribes of north-east India, the Khamtis were also not slow in reacting to the British influence, the degrees of which depend on the nature and extent of contact they developed with their onetime adversaries. Hence barring the religious sphere, radical changes overtook the economic, social and cultural life of the Khamtis as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed and merged with 20<sup>th</sup> century. This change was not however abrupt. In the beginning it was imperceptible in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; especially after independence. Also the pace of change was not equal in all aspects of socio-cultural segments of life changes were quick; in certain others it was slow. Such changes therefore would be difficult to measure precession in terms of years, unless we form a board perspective of evaluation of what existed and what altered and how much altered since the submission of the Khamtis to the British till the time of their present existence. Such changes took place due the

introduction of modern administrative system by the British. Though the Khamtis are pro-traditionalist but during the post-colonial period their society has been changed to some extent. Due to the wave of modernization, especially in case of class formation it is noticed that the role of chieftainship in its old formed does not exist now-a-days as the people consider themselves equal and free citizens irrespective of class. The present generation believes that position of a man in society is not determined by his birth but his activities and spiritual attainment. In case of priest, earlier his duties were not only limited to religious activity but he had the duty to serve as a schoolmaster in monastery. But due to the advent of Christian Missionary schools have played an important for changing their educational system. Therefore the main purpose of the paper is to examine the traditional class formation among the Khamtis and the changes among the Khamtis, Buddhist tribes of north-east India.

### **About the Khamtis**

The Khamtis are one of the advanced tribal groups mostly concentrated in the Lohit and Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh and Lakhimpur district of Assam in India as well as in Myanmar. They belong to the greater Tai-Shan civilization. According to Dutta Choudhari (1978) they 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 to 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 very far in advance of all the north-eastern frontier tribes in knowledge, art and civilization. T.T Cooper says 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 form some of their social laws even civilized nations might take a lesson". The community had its own script and the people speak Khamti dialect which belongs to the Tai family of language. Assamese and English are used for written communication. The khamti men and women can 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. A man of a higher status wears the Burmese pasto (a piece of multi coloured 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 tradition. Each village has a chong (monastery) also known as Buddha vihar. The vihar is 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 chou-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 have minimum 10 years of experience as a chou-mun. 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 are it rich or poor. The Khamtis are devout followers of Buddhism and there is tinged with traditional beliefs and practices. The Khamti society is divided into classes having distinct social status. The highest position is occupied by the chiefs or hereditary village chief (in Khamti chowfa). The priests who are second to the chiefs and position are very influential. Below them there is the class of free men who form the bulk of the population. The slaves of the past were at the bottom of the social structure.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main objective of the study is to show the traditional system of class formation among the Khamtis of north east India. The study also examines the changes of class formation among the Khamtis due to modernization. The study also attempt to examine the traditional Chow-tra council headed by Chowfa and their ruled to disputes the village affairs. It further attempts to study the role of priest in traditional Khamti society.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper is the form of an explanatory study in analysing the traditional class formation among the Khamtis of North-East India and changes due to modernization. The present study is based on secondary data collection. The secondary data was collected by various published sources; i.e. books, journal, magazine, reports, publications, etc. In this study, 12 respondents have been interviewed to collect required first-hand information. Among the 12 respondents, 3 were the community leaders. The interviews have been conducted at Narayanpur in the Lakhimpur district of Assam and Namsai and Chongkham in the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. In Narayanpur 3 individuals and 1 community leaders and in Namsai 4 individuals and 1 community leader and in Chongkham 5 individuals and 1 community have been interviewed.

### **Role of the Chow a in Traditional Khamti Society**

In earlier times, the Khamti society was divided into different classes having distinct social status. The Khamti regard the village as the unit of society. They have highly developed council system. Political authority in their society vests in the village chiefs who normally belong to one of the royal class- Lungking (Namsum), Mansai, Lukh-Kham, Man-nu, Mungyak, Chu-tang and Murglang. The chiefs presides over the village council (mokchup or khai-kham), the members of which we recruited from the people of various social groups. Usually they are all middle aged men having experience in legal matters. The chief or hereditary king occupied the highest position in the society. The chief or the king played an important part in the Khamti society. All village disputes were settled by the village elders. The Khamtis had a traditional village council known as chow-tra, headed by a chowfa (hereditary village chief). The chowfa is assisted by the chow-sing and chowoog-mung, often selected by the chowfa. Minor cases involving theft, adultery and inter-personal conflicts are settled by the chow-sing and chow-mung. The offender is fined an amount depending on the nature of the offence committed. The economic, social, ritual and ceremonial matters are decided by consensus at the village meetings.

The Thamasat, meaning the judgment according to religion, as believed, was originally written down by the saints when the Khamti script came into existence. The Thamasat gives advice to be adopted in a particular situation. Besides mentioning the details of the composition of the members of the chowfa councils it also suggest the nature of disputes and conflicts and the types of judgments be given by the chowfa for such cases, after a proper inquiry and consultation with members of his council.

The chowfa had power to punish a person of the higher strata if they get involved in illegal sexual with a slave woman. In the past a person of the higher strata used to keep slaves for doing various works. The Thamasat mentioned the privileges which a master could enjoy. For example, when a master gets involved in illegal sexual relations with a slave woman whose husband is also a slave to the man; the master should not get punishment or be fined. But when a master is involved in illegal sexual relations with a slave woman whose husband is not his slave he can be fined and punished. But

when a man gets involved with a woman who is not a slave but her husband is; the guilty is only to undergo ritual expiation. No fine should be imposed on him.

The chowfa should give punishment in the following case according to Thamasat. For example if two persons were alleged to have stolen fishes from the traps placed by another person. One trap is very simple and is made up of a single bamboo in such a manner that it can be prepared within a very short time. Another trap is complicated trap. It is considered that stealing of fish from such a simple trap proves the person lazy and also a thief by habit. In a similar way the Thamasat's advice for the amount of fine to be imposed for stealing different domesticated birds and animals indicates its emphasis on the moral aspect. Bigger and rare the animal is lesser the number to be fined. For example, for stealing an elephant or a horse, an equal number of the same animal is to be fined. But for one buffalo or cattle which almost everyone has, four times of the animal stolen is to be fined. For stealing of one pig, goat, dog, fowl, etc. ten similar animals are to be fined and for even an easily available smaller domesticated bird like a duck, a hundred birds of the same kind are to be fined.

### **Role of the Priest in Traditional Khamti Society**

In the traditional Khamti society the second position is played by priest. The priests (Khamti, chau-mun) are men of great importance and their influence is greater even than that of the chiefs. No undertaking is commenced without first consulting them and by pretended divinations they select and announce an auspicious day. They are also the school-masters, every free born Khamti youth being compelled to attend school in the temples, where he learns to read and write his own language.

The Khamti belong to the Hinayana sect of the greater Tai-Burmese tradition. Each village has a chong (monastery) also known as Buddha Vihar. The vihar is adorned with images of Lord Buddha. The community has two categories of priest. The first is called chowsra (principal monk) and second is known as chow-mun (ordinary monk). The priesthood or monkship is not hereditary. Anyone can become a chow-mun, but to become chowra (principal monk) one has to study Buddhist philosophy through Pali literature and have minimum experience of 10 years as chow-mun. 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 all the families, rich or poor.

Every Khamti village has a vihara temple which they call kyang or chang or bapu-chang and which is prominent among the houses of the village of its height and sometime Burma-like roofs. The temple and priest' quarters are also of timber and thatched but the temple are elaborately carved and great neatness and taste are evinced in the arrangement of the internal fittings. On a high pedestal are placed a number of Buddha's generally brought from Burma and some parts of South-east Asia. Pictures of scenes from Jatakas and Vimanavatthu and Petavatthu also adorn the inside of the changs.

One cannot think of a Khamti village without the bhikkhu priests. He has to administer to the spiritual needs of the people and guide them in the religious festivities. He controls the social life of the villagers. The priests have shaven heads and amber-coloured garments and rosaries. The office is not hereditary; any person may enter upon it after the necessary novitiate and instruction in the bapuchang, as the priests' quarter are called. But they must so long as they wear the sacerdotal habit, renounce the world and devote themselves to a life of celibacy. It is responsibility of the villagers to provide food to the Bhikkhu and samanas if any, who may also receive gifts of the barest necessities and accept invitations to meals. In earlier days the Bhikkhu had to go out into the village for his food. Every morning the priests move quickly

through the village preceded by a little boy with a little bell, each holding a lacquered box in which he receives the offerings of the people, generally presented by the women, who stand waiting at the door with a portion of their ready cooked food.

The priests have a great responsibility other than his strictly religious ones. They are also the schoolmasters, every free-born Khamti youth being compelled to attend the school in the temples where he learns to read and write his own language and often using the Burmese written characters for both the language. It is interesting to note that the Khamti are only indigenous people of north-east India who have a script of their own and a traditional system of education based on the principles of Buddhism. There are about seventeen monasteries in the Khamti area of Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh and they are the centre of learning as well. The education in the monasteries is based on the sacred on the texts, but it includes local arts and crafts. Boys are admitted into the monasteries at the age of four or five and they stay there for about twelve years to complete their education. There is no provision of education for girls in the monasteries. The medium of instruction is Khamti at the primary stage. Pali is the medium. The certificate of the Khamti educational centres are recognized by the educational institutions belonging to the Hinayana School of Buddhism. The Buddhist education is confined only to the Khamti area; the rest of Lohit district did not have any educational institution and remained a pre-literate society till the modern system of education was introduced in the district.

In the traditional class formation among the Khamtis, the third and fourth position is occupied by the free men who formed the bulk of the population and the slaves. In the olden times, all members of the Khamti society between 18 and 40 were liable to military service. The defense of the village falls on the able-bodied young men of the age-group of 18-40. The villagers are stockade. The stockades are mounted with poisoned panjis (bamboo spikes) to prevent scaling up. The fire-arms of the Khamti consist of all flint muskets and a few old horse pistols. In case of women, the position of women in the society, though not high, cannot be called law. Women are unrivalled in their own fields. Both male and female are equally hard working and the males treat the women as partners. But women members are not included in the assembly of the village elders. In the field of religion also, they can ascend to the position of a nun. They cook meals and weave clothes for all the family members. The Khamti dress, like the pottery, weapons and metal crafts are manufactured at home by the women. The women are also good at the needle and elaborately embroidered bags, bands for the hair and other articles of artistic beauty are made in olden days. They collect herbs and woods from the adjacent forest and carry fire wood on their backs.

In olden time, the lowest position of the Khamtis society is occupied by the slaves. In the past a person of the higher strata used to keep slaves for doing various works.

### **Changes in Class Formation Among the Khamtis**

The Panchayati Raj in Arunachal Pradesh was introduced in 1967. The tribes having different forms of village councils have shown the adjustability with this new system. In the village, both the traditional and new types of councils exist. The ideal council of chowfa, as described in the Thamasat, has now undergone changes. Usually the eldest member of the royal clan in the village becomes the chowfa. In the absence of any such royal clan the village head is selected from the elder persons of the higher clan and in such a case the head is designated as gaon bura which the Khamti have adopted from the Britishers.

The composition of the chowfa's council has also undergone changes. At present such a council is usually composed of chowfa, the head, and another person from the royal clan who is considered as leader of the youth, four ministers drawn from different clans and one messengers. All types of cases relating to land, non-payment of bride-price, adultery, theft, assault, etc. are dealt with by the council. Such disputes are generally brought to any of the four officials of the traditional village council. The officials discuss the matter among them and put the case before the chowfa. After consulting his ministers, if the chowfa thinks it necessary, he may call the villagers for a meeting through the messengers. The disputes usually do not go directly to the chowfa. It is rather a three-tier system. The individuals involved in a conflict or disputes try to solve the problem at the family level first. If he fails to solve, the case is taken up by the clan members. Even then, if they cannot solve the issue it is referred to the chowfa. This was further enlarged in 1954. It was resolved in a meeting of all the Khamti leaders that if a dispute could not be solved within the village, it could be referred to another village, preferably Chongkham, being the largest village. When the problem could not be solved even at this level the heads of different Khamti village would sit together and decide the case. In case, the dispute still remained unsettled, it can be referred to a government court. This was further re-amended through the introduction of the office of the chief. According to this system there is one chief of all the Khamti population of Lohit district. He holds the highest position in the Khamti political organization. When a dispute remains unsettled even in the body consisting of all the heads of the Khamti village, it is referred to the Chief who is selected from the royal clan. The village within a royal clan, as has already been mentioned, is headed by the gaon bura. He is generally selected by the villagers. His council functions with the assistance of the elderly members of the different clans living in the village. But the officials of the gaon bura's council are neither selected from specific clans nor have they any specific designation. But like the council of chowfa it also plays a significant role in social control. After the gaon bura the next position of honour goes to the Pathok who acts as a guide in all the religious activities.

The chieftainship in its old formed does not exist; now-a-days the people consider they equal and free citizen. Now-a-days the educated young generation considers they equal and free citizens irrespective of class or clan. They believe that the position of a man in society is determined only by his ability and efficiency and not by birth. This however, does not mean that the village elders no longer hold the position which they occupied earlier as on all matters relating to the village, the views of the elders are still sought and respected.

In earlier, the Khamti monasteries are centres of religious activities as well as seats of learning. There are about seventeenth monasteries in the Khamti area. All the teachers in the monasteries are monk and they are well-versed in the Buddhist religious literature. Education in these monasteries is religious-oriented. But the advent of Christian Missionaries and schools played an important role in changing their educational system. The first attempt at spreading English education among the Khamtis and tribal people of Sadiya region was initiated by the American Baptist Mission in the fourth decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Earlier to that a half-hearted attempt to educate the Khamtis of Sadiya was made by C.A. Bruce, opened a school at Sadiya and successfully converted a tribal youth to Christianity. Now-a-days, Chongkham which is one of the biggest Khamti inhabited areas as well as Namsai and Narayanpur has number of Lower Primary, Upper Primary, Higher Secondary School, College, Private Schools and College plays an important part in the spread of education among the Khamti boys and girls. With the progress of modern education the young generation no longer prefers education imparted at the monastery.

In earlier days the Bhikkhu had to go out into the village for his food. Every morning the priests move quickly through the village preceded by a little boy with a little bell, each holding a lacquered box in which he receives the offerings of the people, generally presented by the women, who stand waiting at the door with a portion of their ready cooked food. But now-a-days, his food is sent to him by the villagers. In earlier, the Buddhist monasteries were built with strong timber structures, raised floors and thatched roofs, built the piles in the floor of the house made of spilt bamboo. Instead now they built modern means of construction with wooden plank or cement floor with balcony.

It is very interesting that the free men who earlier formed the bulk of the population have witnessed rapid changes over the period of time. Among them there have been seemed to be emergence of the middle class or rich people who belong to minister's clans. An era of political change and development dawned in Arunachal Pradesh with the departure of the British and adoption of our constitution. Gradually with the spread of education they are becoming political conscious and there are some M.Ps and M.L.As among the Khamtis. Now-a-days there are a good number of business men among the Khamtis who have accumulated much wealth through the timber business. After the independence some new development has taken place which has brought about remarkable change in the sphere of trade and commerce. The extension of civil administration to the remote corners, improvement of transport and of navigation facilities, construction and development roads etc. are mainly responsible for this. The government also endeavoured to open fair price shop in different localities. No doubt the nature of and scope of trade is changing day by day. Hence there has been an all-round mercantile improvement throughout their territory.

In olden days the slaves formed the lowest strata in the Khamti society. In olden days the Khamti had the custom of keeping slaves for maintaining the interest of both the master and slaves. Since the custom keeping slaves no longer exists and some of the services of the slaves are being taken from the labourers, new laws have been introduced. Now-a-days services from the non-Khamti are generally taken either on a daily-wage basis or on monthly contract to be paid in kind which the Khamti have learnt from the people the Assam plains where it is widely practiced. They have borrowed the prevailing practices of the people of Assam along with the system. The system of sharecropping like meyangtu (half-half system), meyang koikhow (two-thirds system) etc. has been available in present time.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century had been a period of mixed fortune for the Khamtis. The British in pursuance of the policy of keeping the tribes of north-east India alienated from the Indian mainstream and did little to accelerate the process of social and economic development of these peoples. They considered the hill areas as economically unproductive, particularly when the Brahmaputra Valley with its tea and oil, offered tremendous financial prospects. They were therefore reluctant to incur expenditure on any kind of development work and were satisfied with merely maintaining a show authority and power whenever specific occasion demand. It was certainly not their intention to initiate any scientific progress or to coordinate various welfare schemes in such way which would satisfy the aspirations of the tribal people and help them to attain some degree of material and political advancement. The Inner Line Regulation of that year effectively barred all outsiders' entry into the north-eastern tribal areas, except those in government employment. It is no wonder that the Khamtis and their neighbours were virtually secluded from the people of the plains and hence, they had very little opportunities of coming into contact with the latter in a big way. This isolation was one factor which was responsible for their underdevelopment. But whenever the Khamtis came into contact with British, their socio-cultural as well as economic condition gradually changed and after the independence they started to consider

themselves equal and free citizens irrespective of classes. The earlier form of class formation among the Khamtis became changed inspired by the moderation. The present generation believes that the position of a man in society is not determined by his birth but by his activities and spiritual attainment.

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