

The Khampti Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh: A brief study on the process of their Settling down in their present homesteads

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Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh is the largest state in the North East Region of India. The state is habituated by twenty six major tribes and numerous sub-tribes. Among the twenty six major tribes the Khampti is one who has a rich culture, history and tradition. In India the Khampti are found in Arunachal and Assam. In the present paper the researcher has focused in the Khampti people living in Arunachal Pradesh. The major concentration of the tribe is found in Namsai District of the state although they are also found in Lohit district. The Khampti are the follower of Theravada Buddhism. The Khampti tribe speaks a language of the Tai group of the Chinese-Siamese family. Literally, the word Khampti means the region of gold, 'Kham' means gold and 'Ti' means region. The Khampti belong to the oldest branch of Tai family. Hence, other branches of the Tai family called the Khampti as 'Ai Tai' means 'the Great Tai'.

The Khampti began to migrate from Myanmar since the 18th century and began to settle themselves in their present homesteads. In the year 1793 AD the Khampti ousted the Ahom Governor called Sadiya Khowa Gohain and have installed their own leader. This historical event happened during the weak regime of Ahom ruler Gaurinath Singha. Due to the unstable internal political condition the Ahom authority was unable to push back the Khampti. Hence, they accepted the Khampti chief as the legitimate Governor of Sadiya. However, later on due to the British-Khampti rivalry the tribe had to fight with the British. At the end after the complete submission of the Khampti chiefs the lineage of Sadiya Khowa Gohain of the Khampti chiefs also came to an end.

Keywords: Kham, Ai Tai, Ahom, Sadiya Khowa Gohain, Ti.

Introduction

The Khampti tribe is one of the major tribe of Arunachal Pradesh among the twenty six (26) major tribes and numbers of sub-tribes. The Khampti people follow the Theravada Buddhism. The Khampti tribe is popularly known as *Borkhampti* by the Assamese. Among the Myanmar people they are known as the *Shans*. Both the Khampti and Ahom belong from the race called *Tai*. The Khampti belong to the oldest branch of *Tai* family thus, other branches of the *Tai* family called the Khampti as 'Ai Tai'. The word *Ai Tai* means 'the Great Tai'. After the Khampti established themselves in their present homesteads of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh the word *Tai* became a comprehensive and generic term for those tribes who are believed to be migrated from Myanmar. In order to understand the term *Tai* and the *Tai* people A.R.Coloquhoun's writing is worth to be mentioned, he wrote that:

'The 'Tai' is a generic name denoting a great branch of the Mongoloid population of Asia. The *Tai* are now mainly concentrated in the Indo-Chinese peninsula. The present habitat of the *Tai* people extends from Assam in the west to Kwangsi and Hainan in the southernmost extremity of Thailand (Siam) in the south. The local people generally know the *Tai* by their local names. The Assam branch of the *Tai*, for instance, that ruled for about six hundred years (1228-1826 A.D) in the Brahmaputra Valley is known by its local name 'Ahom'. The other smaller groups of *Tai* people that came to Assam during a later period are known by their various local name such as the *Hkamti*, the

Hpake or Phakeal as the Assamese speaking people call them, the Turong (Tai-rung), the Sham, the Iton or Itonia, the Hkhamyang and the Nora.¹

There are numbers of myth and theories among the scholars regarding the origin and migration of the Khampti of Arunachal Pradesh. According to the recorded history of the Khampti it is maintained that during the early part of 12th century they lived in the Yunnan province of China. The Khampti migrated from China towards Myanmar and then settled down in Putao area in Myanmar. From Putao region they migrated to the present day Vijaynagar area of Arunachal Pradesh where they settled down for some time and then migrated towards different direction and arrived at their present homesteads. It is assumed among the scholars that due to the hard and extreme climatic condition of their earlier homesteads in China some of the *Ai-Tai Khampti* people migrated towards the extreme northern part of Myanmar in the 13th century.

The Khampti who have migrated from China when they reached Myanmar they settled at a place called *Moung Khampti Loung* which was situated in the Putao region of Myanmar. In Myanmar they began to known as the *Shans* which mean the people who had descended upon the plains of Upper Myanmar from the *Shan* states of the Southern Highlands of Yunan.² In Chinese the word *Shan* means a mountain or highland but the meaning changed when the Khampti reached Myanmar. Literally Khampti means the region of gold, '*Kham*' means gold and '*Ti*' means region.

The Khamti like the Ahom belong to *Mau* branch of the Tai or Shan race. The Shan chieftain of Mogaung is also called the *Nara Rajah* by the Singphos and it appears that the term is also applied to the *Shans* between Hookong and Mogaung in Myanmar. The Ahom kings regaded the Naras as their close kinsmen and the Nara kings also looked upon the Ahom kings as '*Bhai Rajas*' or brother kings as they were descended from the same Shan stock.³ Their original home was *Khamtilung* or *Khamti-mung* which lies in the upper courses of Irrawaddy River. Later on the Burmese king Alaungpaya or Alomphra whose regime was from 1752 to 1760 began to dismember the Mau Shan kingdom. Due to the dismemberment of the Mau Shan kingdom a colony of about one hundred khampti was formed on the Tengapanee which was situated about 42 hours journey eastward by boat from Sadiya.⁴ Gradually the numbers of Khampti migrants increased in the region as the then Ahom ruler did not show any reluctance in letting the Khampti settled down. Regarding the early settlements of the Khamti R.B.Pemberton writes that:

"The Khamptis of Suddya* who originally emigrated from the hills on the east, and obtained permission from the Raja of Assam to settle in the plains, established themselves on the banks of the Tengapanee, from where they made a successful irruption into Suddya during the trouble reign of Raja Gaurinath in 1794. They reduced the Assamese inhabitants to slavery, their chief assumed the title of suddya Kowa Gohain which he has ever since retained."²

The Khampti successfully began to migrate from the Moung Khampti Loung since the 18th century and began to occupy territories on the Lohit and Dehing rivers. Though the Ai Tai-Khamptis arrived in their present homesteads much earlier, their presence was felt in the region only in 1794 when they had started their further conquest towards the region of Sadiya. After the demarcation of political boundary between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh the Khampti settlements are found in both the states. In Assam the Khampti have their settlements in Lakhimpur, Tinsukia and Dhemaji districts. In Lakhimpur there are seven khampti villages at Narayanpur area viz; Borkhamti Loung, Sirviya (Siribhuyan), Borpothor (Ma-Na Loung), Gusaibari, Beltola, Tipling and Tunijan.⁵ In Demaji district the Khampti settlement are basically in the northern Dhemaji. The Khampti villages are guwalsapori, Bebejia, Khajua etc.

In Tinsukia district their main concentration are at Munglang Ai-Tai Khampti village at Margerita, Bordumsa and Dirak region. Later on, large numbers of khampti families of Sunpura and Lakhimpur

have migrated to the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, the Lohit region became the major concentration of the Khampti in the state however they were scattered in the districts like Changlang, Tirap and Lohit. After the creation of Namsai district the major concentration of the khampti are found in the Namsai and Chongkam area. Besides these areas there are numbers of khampti villages in Arunachal Pradesh like Manmow, Lathao, Tengapani, Nalung, Guna nagar, Nigroo etc. The Khampti are found scattered throughout the southern and northern banks of the Brahmaputra River in the vicinity of Sadiya region. The *Ai Tai-Khampti* is distributed in the foothills and plains beyond the Kamlang River and up to the south east of the river Lohit.

Like many hill tribes the Khampti established themselves in the plains of Assam during the weak regime of Gaurinath Singha. They were attracted towards the fertile soil and plain areas of Assam where they could start a settled life with agricultural fields. The *Ai Tai-Khampti* speaks a language of the Tai group of the Chinese-Siamese family.⁶ In the present paper the discussion is focused on the Khampti inhabiting in Arunachal Pradesh.

Ousting of Ahom Governor

In the 1793 with the help of their neighbouring tribe Singpho, the Khamti ousted the Ahom Governor called Sadiya Khowa Gohin and installed their own leader in his place. However, the Khamti continue to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Ahom king. At that point of time, Sadiya region was considered to be very fertile tract which attracted the Khampti people also. Later on the Khampti crossed the Brahmaputra River and ousted the former Sadiya Khowa Gohain, Cha Bo Ngen who was then Assamese governor of Sadiya. In this way the Khampti began to control the fertile tract of Sadiya thus, they found a fertile soil for starting an agricultural field and a plain area for starting a homestead. While discussing the political situation of the Khampti in the Sadiya region after 1794 B.K.Singh writes that;

'After attaining the status of Sadiya Khowa Gohain, the *Ai Tai-Khampti* chief added the title 'Gohain' after his name leaving the former surname 'Namchoom'. His descendents and clan also followed the same pattern. Thus, the chief became the virtual and independent ruler of Sadiya region under the seal and authority of the Ahom ruler. Actually, the word 'Gohain' is not a surname but a status or rank which was introduced by the Ahoms. Therefore, the *Ai Tai-Khamptis* began to rule the Sadiya region with two chieftains Bura Raja and Deka Raja i.e; Chau Mu-Ngan-Lung and Chau Ai-Noy Lungking Kham respectively.'⁷

While the Khampti chief occupied the Sadiya region the then Ahom ruler was Gaurinath Singha whose regime was from 1780 to 1795 AD. The internal political condition of the Ahom was very unstable due to which the Ahom authority was unable to push back the Khampti. Therefore, the Ahom authority accepted the *Ai Tai-Khampti* chief as the legitimate Governor of Sadiya. With the occupation and rule over the Tengapani region, the *Ai-Tai-Khampti* chiefs began to designate themselves as 'Namchoom' which means sour water, for ruling on the region of Tengapani River.⁸ Later on, all the descendents or clans also began to use the word 'Namchoom' after their names which signifies that they were the ruling clan of the Tengapani region. Although the Khampti conquered the Sadiya tract in 1794 the tribe formally occupied the region in 1797 AD.

With the occupation of the tract, the title and dignity of the Ahom governor were assumed by the *Ai Tai-Khampti* chief called Chau-Mu-NganLung, the son of Chau Ngi Lungkieng.⁹ Later on, the British authority confirmed the Khamti chief of Sadiya called the Sadiya Khowa Gohain as the company's feudatory in possession of that district on 15th May 1926. After their occupation in the Sadiya tract the Khampti began to settle down in the plains of Assam. The Khampti were known for their agricultural advancement. After they settled down in Sadiya tract they began to start to develop their agricultural

fields for which they required huge numbers of workers. Apart from the agricultural purpose they required workers in order to perform their household chores also. Therefore, enslavement of the weaker section of the society began and it became possible as the Khampti possessed political and administrative power after usurping the post of Sadiya Khowa Gohain. After usurping the powers and status, the Ai Tai-Khampti chief reduced the Assamese ryots to virtual slavery.¹⁰ Since then the intensification of the slavery began among the Khampti of Arunachal Pradesh. Later on after the British occupation of Assam the Khamti began to rebel against the later mainly due to the slave abolition policy of the British. The rivalry between the British and the Khampti resulted in numbers of clash between them. However, with the complete submission of the Ai Tai-Khamptis to the British, the lineage of Sadiya Khowa Gohain of the Ai Tai-Khampti chiefs also came to an end. Chau Pha-Phang-Lu or Ranuwa Gohain was the last Ai Tai-Khampti Sadiya Khowa Gohain of the Sadiya region.¹¹ In the process of their settling down in their present homesteads what attracts the Khampti was the fertile soil of their present homesteads. The historical event of the ousting of the Ahom officer and usurping of the position of the Sadiya Khowa Gohain provide the tribe political power and social influence. Thus, they started to cultivate their present homesteads and have settled there where they still inhabited.

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- *Suddya means Sadiya region of Assam.