

KHAMPTIS OF NAMSAI: THE SAGA OF LEGENDS AND TRADITION

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Abstract:

The North-Eastern India which has been known of being home of myriad tribes also becomes the stage and platform of many kinds of Tribal culture and customs. Some of the tribes which are migrated from outside Indian territory brings along with themselves a very diverse manner of heritage with some history to recall. Thus when the past of the land meets the past of the tribe we get to see the magic of cultural diffusion which balances the tribe and its customs with the contemporary terms and conditions. The Tai Khampti people of India calling Namsai as their homeland, succeeded in holding on their Shan identity despite of cultural. Both land and the tribe has their own deep history to recall and reconcile which ends up in a close need relationship with the root which are already intertwined.

Keywords: -Tribal culture, Khampti, Shan identity, cultural diffusion, Tai Khampti

Introduction

"To speak of the Khampteas as a tribe is to do them 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 Khamtees, far from some of the social laws even civilized nations might take a lesson." The aforesaid words by T.T Cooper in 'The Mishmee Hills', London 1873, proudly delivers the Khamptis from the confined identity of being just only a tribe who have migrated to India some centuries ago. This sub group of the Tai people the 'Khampti or the 'Khamti' is recognized among the major 25 tribes prevailing in Arunachal Pradesh. They call Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh as their homeland and beholds a very close knitted past with the land. An abode of legend, the 18th district of Arunachal Pradesh witnessed a brief and blood stained medieval history which left both mark of pride and scars of betrayal and treason. The remnants of the medieval past lays foundation of becoming homeland of brave souls who migrated here centuries later carrying the virtue of tradition and culture of another soil. When both of these proficiency merges, we get a demography holding a diverse manner of custom and tradition, which is one of the significant nature of demography of North Eastern India. Here every tribe has its own legendary inside stories and orders. Migrations and cultural diffusion has shaped the North-Eastern population in a great manner which is indicated through their customs and heritage.

Objectives

The objective of this study is to understand the phenomena of migration and cultural diffusion on perspective of North-East east India, which has been the hearth of such facts since time immemorial. There are numbers of tribe in North East. Some of which are aboriginals, and rest are migrated. These migrated tribe carries their own tradition and customs which when merges with the traditional practice of the land, we find a very distinct taste and unique virtue of the tribe which shades in myriad chroma. In this study we fairly try to analyze and discuss the historical and contemporary connection of Khampti tribe with its Indian homeland. The study shows how the histories get merged into a new balanced contemporary.

Namsai and its legend

The 18th district of Arunachal Pradesh, Namsai with Its panoramic beauty and mother nature's abundance, has long history to recall. Though a fair few years, of being separated from Lohit District (2014), this youngest district holds the tradition, culture and legends as old as time. Namsai is a district, located 75km east from Tinsukhia (Assam), is drawing good attention recently owing to fast development of township. The local language Khampti syllables 'Nam' and 'Sai' meaning the 'water' and 'sand', together makes Namsai denoting the grace of sand besides the water body of beautiful Dihing river, a tributary of Brahmaputra.

Home of the Khamti Tribe, this land witnesses a brief medieval history of Sutiya kingdom. The Sino-Tibetan ethnic group Sutiya, controlled a wide area of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Kingdom established by King Birpal in 1187 CE. Since then the dynasty left the marks of battles, legends, chivalry and rivalry on this land. From Birpal assuming the title of Gayapal and his son Gaurinarayan or Ratnadhwapal being the greatest ruler, conquers further areas of Northeast, which includes present day Namsai, and claimed the proud title of Lord of Hills. Legends involves endless battles and conflicts between the Sutiya and the contemporary Ahoms, where

mostly the Sutiya's gaining the upper hands. In 1376 murder of Ahom king Sutuphaa treacherously by Sutiya king Jayadhwajpal can be considered as the nick point of the scenario. History recalls evidences, when the Sutiya king pretending a friendly reconciliation, invites the Ahom king on a regatta at the Saffrai river. Enticing him to barge without any attendant. Being defenseless king Sutuphaa was brutally executed by the Sutiya's. This triggered the conflict to its vigor. Resulting a series of battles and uncompromising bloodsheds. Not until 1524 when Nityapal the last ruler of the dynasty, was assassinated by the Ahoms, accomplishing the century long revenge. Nityapal's incapability made the kingdom vulnerable enough to the Ahom attackers, that they took the opportunity of its weakest position. Loosing before the Ahoms, the Sutiya's still refuses to quit and leave the ground. They moved near the frontier and thus making the conflict continue for another 150 years. When finally, in 1673 the entire kingdom falls into Ahom domination. However, Namsai never witnessed any Muslim invasion. The Ahoms fiercely withstood the Delhi Mughals and the Turkish and Afghan attackers of Bengal. Hence Namsai holds pride, being one of the last territories to be brought under British Rule in the beginning of 19th Century along with other Ahom territories.

Migration and history of Khampti Tribe

This sub group of the Tai people the 'Khampti or the 'Khamti' is recognized among the major 25 tribes prevailing in Arunachal Pradesh. The word suggests the syllables 'Khampt' meaning 'Gold' and 'Ti' denoting 'Land', together manifests a "land full of gold", where they inhabit. In India Namsai, Changlang, Lower Subansiri, Tirup districts of Arunachal Pradesh and Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Dhemaji districts of Assam, Sangain division and Hkamti district of Myanmar are marked as their current homeland. 2011 Indian Census records the existence of 14,031 Khampti people in India. Out of which 12,925 homes in Arunachal Pradesh and 1,106 in Assam. Myanmar alone harbors 2,00,000 Khampti souls.

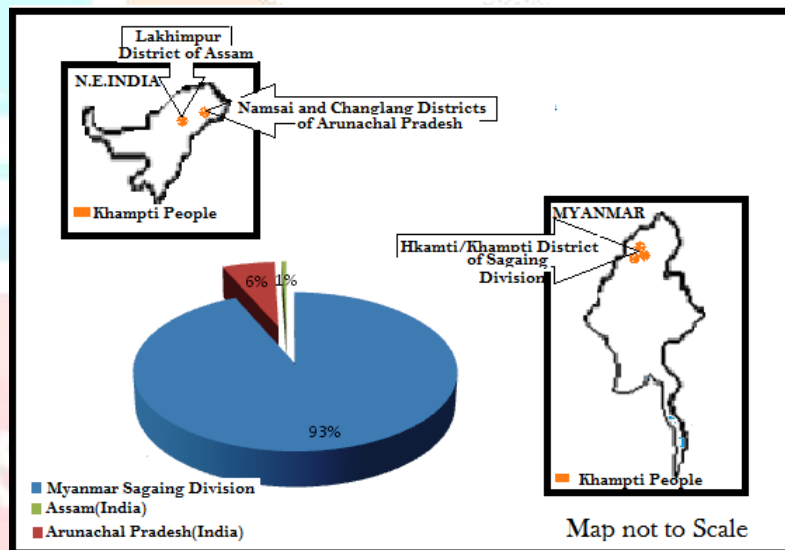


Fig:- Distribution of Khampti Population in World

Khamptis being more than just only a tribe has their distinct social and cultural attributes. Along with their unique traditions and customs, the tribe also has a fascinating history to recall. The chronicle of origin of Khampti Tribe, roots back to 6th century AD China, when two royal heirs Khun-Lu and Khun-Lai established two separate Tai Kingdoms, Mung-Hee and Mung-Hum (Khampti). During 608 AD, Ai-Khun-Long, the eldest son of Khun-Lai constituted another Tai kingdom Mong-Kong in Burma (Myanmar). Kham-Tyap-Pha a descendant of Ai-Khun-Long, migrated to the North and formed the kingdom of Moa-Long or Moa-Pong in the fertile valley of river Cinduin. The Khamptis, Ahoms, Khamyangs, Phake and other Shan tribes lived there peacefully till the end of 12th Century. A century later, when the Ahoms started migrating to Assam through Pangsau pass, the Khamptis too moved further North laying foundation of their very new separate territory Mung-Khampti-Long or Bor-Khampti in Putao Burma. Though the kingdom was divided into seven principalities, the suzerainty of Mong-Kong was well accepted. But by the middle of 18th Century, the Khamptis started experiencing some vital calamities that wrecked their peace. King Alamphra, the founder of 'Kongboun' dynasty dismembered the Khampti turf and other Shan territories in upper Burma by annexing the states and adopting the principal of divide and rule. Not only Alamphara, but also his four more immediate successors where uncompromisingly vipereous. When the Burmese army probed Siam, Manipur and Northern Tai territory, the king of Mong-Kong fled away and took refuge in China. This led the Khamptis and other tribes to migrate and settle in the vicinity of Sutiya region. Hence different historians argue regarding the legend of final immigration of Khamptis in the North East India. However, breakage of conflict between the Khampti principalities and hostile from the Burmese kings can be considered as the final call of the migration. Initially they settled along the Tengapani river in Arunachal Pradesh. Later on the Khamptis started inhabiting near the embankment of Tengapani and Noa Dihing, in the lower region.

Customs and Cultural Diffusion

However, 21st century evidences Khamptis to be one of the very distinctive tribe. Being an active agriculturist, Khampti people are ideally known for their peace loving nature. Theravada Buddhism became more than only a theology, as the people have learned to relate this in every aspect of their life. This is profoundly reflected in their customs and convention. A stereotypical Khampti village cannot be imagined without a Vihara or Chang and Buddhist Bhikkhu in the center. A typically raised floor and thatched roomed houses always include an individual prayer room, where every morning and evening offering of Nam Taw Yangli and Khao Tang Sam is given. Worshipping of Uppakutta, Sangken festival and tradition of Poi Lu Lik, shows how Khamptis have managed to include Buddhism in their worldly affairs. During Sangken festivals, people prohibits all kind of ill habits, while priests resides inside the temple. They splash clean water on Buddha figure, symbolizing purity. Though decades being departed from their root, Khamptis have managed to maintain their Shan identity in the very context of Arunachal Pradesh. They are still linked with religious functionaries of Burma. The presence of Buddhist priest of Burma is customarily regarded as great occasion. A very uniqueness of Khamptis can also be explicated through their tongue, as they are the only Tai-speaking tribe inhabiting within the Indian territory. Both the Khampti language and alphabetic scripts owes its origin to Shan. But due to centuries of geographical separation some distinct characteristics has developed in the language. The Lik Tai script also obtains a divergent feature from the traditional Shan script, claiming the Khamptis to be the only tribe of Arunachal Pradesh to have their very own alphabetic scripture. Corresponding with the base of old tradition and customs, modern education has also been widely accepted. In this present era Khampti people really learned the art of modest balancing of lifestyle. Thus the golden people of the golden land had envisaged a diverse manner of blend managing to preserve their age long identity in the midst of the tide of modernization. Being aloft of recent trend of westernization, word 'Khampti' doesn't only denote a tribe or a language, the word represents a true way of living in itself which even the westerners had acknowledged.

Conclusion

Today Namsai area is mostly recognized as Khamti homeland. Khamti and Singpho are the major tribe found here. Theravada Buddhism is the religion dominantly followed by the locals since time immemorial. Christians and Hindus are also counted in notable numbers. The tribal population has shown a rare duality of accepting the modern lifestyle along with perseverance of culture and tradition. The Khamtis celebrate festivals like Pai Pee Mau and Maika Samphai. Sangkan is celebrated with splashing of clean water and ceremonial bath of Buddha. Tupula bhaat, Pitha and Khichdi are the popular delicacies prepared by the people. The local men are easily distinguished with traditional costumes such as Siu Pachai and Phanoi, and women looks graceful on Sinn and Famoi, Amber earrings and Coral beaded necklace. Here economy is widely dependent on Agriculture, as it is the major reasonable subsistence for the Namsai resident. Rice is the crop mostly grown. Other than this, mustard seed cultivation and Tea plantations are also included. Timber production is widely popular due to presence of varieties of vegetative species, but is largely controlled by the government to avoid over exploitation of vegetation. Tourism also holds a promising future here. The eye soothing greenery and vegetation are natural tourist attractor. The Golden Pagoda of Namsai being one of the largest monasteries of Arunachal Pradesh, attracts plenty of visitors from all around the country every year.

In spite of all these, education is still widely embraced with establishment of number of school, colleges and universities. With rising township and advent of recent urbanization, communication has also been made hospitable with NH2 road which was originally built by Oil India. The Noa Dihing bridge inaugurated in 2002 on Noa Dihing river is the heart of the communication of this region. It's the second most important bridge in Arunachal Pradesh after Parasuram bridge.

Thus along with modernization, an unforgettable history is hidden deep within the heart of Namsai. A unique blend of urbanization and tradition indeed makes the environment interesting and amicable. As the people has beautifully learned to balance both the aspects of life hand to hand.

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