

Rituals and Festivals of the Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh

Leki Sitang

Arunachal Pradesh, the north-eastern tip of India in the Trans-Himalayan region is bounded by the Republic of China on the north, Assam on the south, Myanmar on the east and the Kingdom of Bhutan on the west. Arunachal Pradesh is home to 26 major and numerous minor tribes with rich cultural traditions. Being distinctly a tribal state, rituals and festivals are an essential part of the socio-cultural life of the people. Most of the rituals and festivals of Arunachal Pradesh are connected with agriculture, and celebrated with ritualistic gaiety to thank God for His providence or to pray for a bumper harvest

There are three kinds of the religious practices in Arunachal Pradesh which can be divided into three groups. The Noctes and the Wanchos of Tirap, whose long association with Assam converted most of them into Hinduism, the second group comprises of Adis, Apatanis, Nishis, etc., a large majority of the population, maintain their ancient belief and indigenous concepts of nature, and worship the Donyi-Polo (the Sun and the Moon) and the third group, the Monpas and the Sherdukpens of the Kameng and the Singphos, the Khamtis and the Tikak Tangsas of Lohit and Changlang districts practice Buddhism. These tribes following Buddhism can again be divided into two categories, namely, the Monpas, the Membas and the Sherdukpens follow the Mahayana school of Buddhism and the Singphos, the Khamtis and the Tikak Tangsas follow the Hinayana or the Theravada school of Buddhism. It is interesting that, though Buddhism originated in India it reached Arunachal Pradesh from outside India. J.N. Choudhury pointed out that, "The Mahayana school of Buddhism, which came to be collectively known as the Northern Buddhism, entered Tibet possibly from Kashmir in the 7th Century, and again found its way back to India among the Monpas and the Sherdukpens of the Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh via Bhutan. On the other hand the Hinayana School, later called Southern Buddhism, which have originally migrated to Burma from Ceylon, was carried back to India by the Khamtis and the Singphos."¹

The Khamtis are one of the major tribe of Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. Although they are tribals but any outsider will be surprised to see them in their original settings. T.T. Copper says, "To speak of the Khamtis as a tribe is to do little justice for there is that about the word tribe which conveys the ideas of wildness for and want of culture, very far from forming a characteristics of the Khamtis, for from some of their social laws even civilized nations might take a lesson."² The Khamtis belongs to the great Tai group. They immigrated to this part of India from Mungkhamti or Borkhamti of Burma

The Khamtis practised a pure variety of Buddhism after the Burmese School, designated as Theravada meaning 'unmoved', which mean they have not moved from the original teachings of Buddha (to follow the Saddharma's eight fold path and trying to attain Arahathship). T.T. Cooper in 1873 has made an interesting observation by mentioning that, though by religion, the Khamtis are the followers of Burmese Buddhism, excepting among the priests, their religion was little more "than polytheism under thin veil of Buddhist pantheism and the beauty of Gautama's teachings being utterly unknown among them."³

Theravada Buddhist festivals like those of other religions are tied to calender and annual festival is tied to natural and agricultural cycles. The festival does not occur during the agricultural seasons nor during the rainy seasons when travelling is difficult. Although the Theravada Buddhist of Arunachal Pradesh have solar year, the months are lunar, and four days of each lunar month, the full and new moon and the eight days after each of these are duty days or Satang days (Pali, Uposatha). Theravada Buddhist holy days always falls on an Uposatha day and it is specially sacred because, it commemorates some important events in the life of the Buddha.⁴

There are many rituals and festivals which the Theravada Buddhist of Arunachal Pradesh celebrates. Every Khamti village has a vihara, which they called kyong or chang and all viharas are built on eastern part of the village usually near a river bank.

Theravada Buddhist festivals, ceremonies and rituals have, daily, weekly, biweekly, monthly and annual cycle. Houses of the Theravada Buddhist have a small shrine on the eastern side of the house, in the front side. The shrine consists of a shelf for the Buddha's image and picture (Khamti, Hangphra) and a vases (Khamti, Nang-le) with fresh flowers to honour the Buddha and candles are lit as part of daily devotions. The older people conclude their evening devotions by saying

their beads and reciting, anicca, dukkha, anatta or Buddha Dhamma, Sangha⁵

Sanken (New Year)

Sanken (origin. Sankranti or New Year)⁶ is the new year of Theravada Buddhist of Arunachal Pradesh. It is celebrated in the fifth month of the Buddhist calendar, which falls in April (*Lin-hok*). Sanken is not only celebrated by the Buddhist of Arunachal Pradesh but also by the Buddhist in South India, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Sri Lankan Buddhists although they follow the Theravada School of Buddhism do not observe this festival as they have their own new year's day. Baruas and Chakmas also do not observe the festival, although they are Theravada Buddhists.

Sanken festival is celebrated for three days, and on the fourth day the new year begins. This is an important festival. People clean their houses and decorate with garlands and flags. In the evening, houses and viharas are illuminated with candles. The youth makes preparation for the festival in advance and rehearse songs (*Lik-Sangren*). Lay persons make merry by offering foods, cash and kinds to the monks. A makeshift temple (*Changfra*) is made and it is decorated with flowers, leaves and ornamental twigs with an indigenous mechanism call *Long-kong* for spraying water to the idols. *Long-kong* is placed inside the *Changfra* and it is connected with a boat like structure (*Hanglin*), in which people pour water, when sufficient water is poured to the *Hanglin*, the *Long-kong* automatically moves round and splash water to every corner of the *Changfra*. On the festival day, the Buddha idol of the temple (*Chong* or *Kyong*) is taken out by the monks (*Chou-moun*) with the help of the local priest (*Choupechepe*) and the general public and keep the idols in the *Changfra*. Idols are washed ceremoniously with great devotion, thereby purifying and rejuvenating them for the new year ahead, and brings sands for the temple ground to replace sands that may have been unwittingly removed during the previous year by the visitors on their shoes. After washing all the idols the *Chang*, the boys and girls splash water, muds and black colour water (*Mimo*) at each other. Therefore, Sanken is also called "water festival" During this festival, fishes and caged birds are set free with hopes that the coming year would bring in happiness, peace and prosperity and to avoid misfortunes in the coming year. Like other festivals Sanken also has its own origin and myth associated with it.

According to the origin of Sangken, King Anjana (Mayadevi's father and Siddhartha's [Buddha] maternal grandfather) was the ruler of Devadaha, the year as per the calendar in vogue was at that time 8649, and it was felt cumbersome for the conduct of day to day affairs. Therefore, the King amended the calendar and introduced a new one to commemorate the beginning of the year from the date of his coronation. This calendar starts from the first day of Chaitra. According to this calendar, Siddhartha was born in the year 68 and attained Parinibhana in the year 148. After Buddha's death (Parinibana) first Buddhist Council was held at Rajagriha, under the patronage of Emperor Ajatashatru, he again amended the calendar, and the new year was started from the day of the first Buddhist Council. In 624 B.C. King Samundari sat on the throne of Myanmar, the court astrologers advised him that the number 624 is not auspicious for the kingdom and it should be changed for the prosperity of the kingdom. As per the astrologer's advice a new calendar was started by the King and counted the year from 2 instead 624. Again in the year 562, Maharaja Pappa Chourahan amended the calendar as per the advice of his astrologers and started the counting from the year 2, instead 562. On this occasion he ordered the people to observe the new year with celebration by sprinkling water on the images of Buddha and he declared public holiday on that day.⁷

According to the myth of Sangken celebration, once in the remote past, Brahma (*Chou-khun-sang*) and Deva (*Chou-khun-keo*) engaged in a debate, and the dispute was taken to an earthly sage for arbitration with the understanding that the loser would forfeit his head. Deva won the debate but there was a problem, he could not dispose the head because if the head is buried in the earth, there would be terrible drought and whole earth would dry up and if it is sunk in the ocean, the ocean too would dry up. Therefore, Deva (*Chou-khun-keo*) approached Indra (*Sikiya*), the King of Gods for help. Indra ordered seven Goddesses to hold the head each for a year in turn. But how could a year be counted was the problem with the Goddesses. Indra (*Sikiya*) the King of Gods said that, he annually descends to the earth where he remains for the last two-three days of the old year to note good-doers and evil-doers and record their name, after completing his work he returns to his abode in Tavatima or heaven which is the beginning of the year. Accordingly, the Goddesses followed Indra's order and thus started the routine for them. At the end of the year the Goddesses who holds the head washes it and passes it to the next Goddess and so on. People believe this religious myth and started celebrating the new year with religious enthusiasm.⁸

Poi Puthi Kham (Buddha Jayanti)

Poi Puthikham is celebrated in the full moon of the lunar month of Veskha, which usually falls in May, is commemorated as the day, on which the Buddha was born. He attained enlightenment and died (Parinibbana). In this festival, monks preach the Ahimsa discourse to the people, Panchashilla is recited and people sing sacred songs and followed by mass prayer and community feast. In addition to the central ritual of any Uposatha, the observance of the precepts, Poi Puthikham is marked by watering the Bodhi-tree, under which the Buddha got enlightenment⁹

Nowa Strorti (I'assavasa)

This festival is observed for three months, from the full moon day of July (Asvdha. Khamti, Lin-pet), to the full moon of October, Asvina (Khamti, Lin-sip-yet), this period is called Buddhist Vassavasa (Khamti, Nowa or Va), during this period monks do not travel, and spend their time on studies and meditation and it is solemn season for laymen. Secular festivities, such as marriage, public entertainments, etc. are avoided during this period. "Five Percepts" are recited by the people and fasting is observed by the devotees. Along with the New Year, the full moon that marks the beginning and end of Nowa Strorti (Vassavasa) are the two most important occasions in the Buddhist calendar. Lin-pet (Asvdha) is the beginning, not only of Nowa Strorti (Vassavasa) but also of two seasons, beginning of monsoon and paddy cultivation. With Lin-pet villagers become busy with agricultural activities like, ploughing the field, planting and transplanting paddy. Lin-Sip-Yet is celebration on a full moon day of Asvina (September / October), the devotees offer donations to the monks, artificial tree call Petesa (desire giving tree) in Pali text Kalpataru is prepared, food and currency notes are hung to the Petesa, which is gifted to the monks in recognition of their sacrifice and piety.¹⁰

Mebi Sitang Festival

On a moonless day of *Ashvin* (September / October) this festival is observed. During the festival people clean their house and surrounding compounds and take baths before going to Vihara where the monks recite from the holy scriptures for the people.¹¹

Sore Sitane Festival

The festival is observed on a full moon day of *Asvin* (September/ October) On this festival, food items, fruits, candles, etc. are offered to

monks and it is believed that on this auspicious day, whoever feeds the poor will be happy and prosperous in this life and hereafter. Therefore, the significance of this festival is to feed the poor people.¹²

Wa-ok Sitang Festival

This festival occurs on a full-moon day of Kartika (October/November). In this festival, unlike other festivals, people celebrate by doing worldly things, such as taking of drinks etc. Everybody offer worship in *Vihara Petesa* (Pali, Kalpataru) or desire giving tree are made with foodstuffs, currency notes, hanging from the branches and the Petesa is offered to monks in recognition of their sacrifices. This ceremony called Nawa-ok-poi is celebrated to count the number of years of mendicancy of a monk.¹³

Chowmoon Kanda Poi Festival

This festival is celebrated in Agranayan (November/December). In this festival villagers and the monks along with the chief monk holds prayer meetings to honour the Sangh (Khamti, anatta), most of the time is spent in prayers.¹⁴

Maiko-Sumphai (bidding farewell to cold season)

Maiko-Sumphai means putting of wooden stacks into fire. It is celebrated on the full moon day in the month of February. In this festival youths of the village collect fire woods and prepare a tower like structure from the fire wood. The shape of the structure is either triangular or pentagonal, heptagonal or octagonal, synchronizing Tri Ratna, Panchasheel, Sapta Buddanga and Astangik Marga of Buddhism. The next morning the Maiko is set on fire, followed by a community feast. It is believed that, the Buddha on this day at Sarnath told his disciples to have Parinirvana, after three months, the disciples thought that Buddha would not be there with them in the next winter so they offered warmth by setting fire to the fire wood This tradition is followed by the Theravada Buddhist of Arunachal Pradesh.¹⁵

Sangkham Festival

To become a novice monk, there is a festival among the Khamtis call Sangkham, this is held generally after training of students in the

monastery, when their age is between 7 to 15 years This is a festival of mass gathering where monks and people from various villages assembled at a particular fixed time in a monastery. This festival is held for three days On the first a would be novice monk wears white dress and observes eight precepts (Asthasila) from the head monk and practice counting of beads and meditation in the monastery. On the early morning of the second day after prayer, the boy gives up the eight precepts after taking permission from the head monk and excepts five precepts. On this day the student is decorated like a king as the imitation of God and processions are taken out in the village roads with drums and music by the villagers and after that meals are provided with hundred varieties of food and curries. On the last day the boy has to take oath under senior monks. The oath is given in the Pali language, after oath taking senior monks hand over the dress chivara (dress of monk) to the candidate boy and finally, he becomes a novice monk (Chou-Chang). This festival associates with the ordinance of novice monk is prevalent in Burma, Khamti and Singpho societies.¹⁶

Pollens - (*Poi-festival, Leng-chariot*)

This important Buddhist festival is one for observance of mortuary rites of the monks When a monk dies, the news of his death is conveyed to the Buddhist living far and near The death is an occasion for a festival and the date of the festival is generally fixed according to the convenience of the people living in distant-areas, who come to pay homage to the memory of the monk. The local villagers invite all the Buddhist villages to participate in it. It is believed that, if one can participates in seven such Poileng, one is supposed to attain nivana. To observe this festival, a chariot is made with four or six pairs of big wheels and platform by selected wood carvers The chariot is well decorated and the coffin is placed in the middle of it. On the day of the festival, general prayer to Buddha is held and the monks, then inaugurate the festival by pulling the chariot themselves with ropes tied to the chariot. Thereafter, each and everyone present start pulling the chariot. A number of sheds are constructed near the monastery by the local villagers for the accommodation of the people coming from outside to participate in the function. Continuous feasting goes on till the function is over. The festival usually continuous for three days and at the end the chariot is burnt along with the coffin. The funeral ceremony is conducted by a senior monk.¹⁷

Kothins Pot (Robe offering ceremony)

Kathing Poi is observed on the full moon day of October/November. For this celebration, a particular vihara is selected, and the selected vihara is decorated beautifully for the auspicious occasion. In the evening the whole area around the vihara is illuminated by lighting thousands of candles. Monks assemble in the selected vihara for this festival and joyous occasion and select a monk who has behaved well in practice and discipline, to accept the Kathin Civara for subsequent distribution.

Although originally this festival was conceived as exclusively a Civara dana ceremony, but the Civara offering ceremony has become an occasion for providing the monks with all their needs and wants. Petesa (desire giving tree) is made and donated to the monks. The focal act of this festival is the donation of Civara, which is prepared in the same night and offers to the monk in the early next morning. Commemorating the robe offered to the Buddha by his mother, when he was still a prince. According to the myth associated with this festival, Buddha's mother realized that, her son would discard His royal garments on the very next day to become a mendicant and she wanted to be the first to offer Him with the required robe. So, she stayed up all night weaving it, and early next morning sent the robe to him through a heavenly messenger. To commemorate this event "pillar of light" is erected and village people sit up all night stitching a robe to offer to a monk early next morning.¹⁸

Yen-nan or Lik-voi (Water Libation Ceremony)

Water Libation Ceremony is an intrinsic part of all public ceremonies and public acts of meritorious giving. In this ceremony the worshippers call attention of Earth Goddess called Nang-vasunduri (in ancient India, vasundhara). The myth associated with this ceremony is that, when Buddha was meditating under the Bodhi tree, Mara the evil one arrives to oust the Buddha from the Bodhi tree. Mara pointed to his army as validation for his claim, then Buddha pointed towards the earth, as witness to his countless meritorious deeds, suddenly goddess of Earth Vasundhara appeared in the form of a woman to display Buddha's merits by squeezing her hairs, suddenly water poured on the earth to commemorate Buddha's meritorious deeds. The water pouring from her hair was so numerous that it created a flood. Seeing this Mara and his soldiers ran away. Following these, the Theravada Buddhist of Arunachal Pradesh commemorate their meritorious acts by pouring water on the ground calling upon Nang-vasundari to witness their meritorious acts.¹⁹

Thus, all the rituals and festivals of the Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh although monastic ceremonies yet the participation of the laymen are important, as all the festivals are not complete without the participation of the laymen. The word 'Sangha' is used to describe not only the monastic order itself but also the communal togetherness of Buddhist monks and Buddhist laymen.

Notes and References

1. J.N. Choudhury, *The Tribal Culture and History of Arunachal Pradesh*, Delhi, 1990. p. 57.
2. T.T. Cooper, *New Routes for Commerce: The Mishmi Mills*, London, 1873, p. 145.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Kondinya, *Monastic Buddhism Among the Khamtis of Arunachal*, New Delhi, 1986, p. 69.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
6. Kondinya, 'Role of Religion in Khamti Society', *Arunachal News*, Vol. No. 6. No. 3. 1977, p. 13.
7. Ven. Agadhama, A Note on New Year Festival Sangken, Unpublished Paper of Head Monk, Namsai Pahjotti Sasana Rodh Vihara.
8. Chow Peng Manphai (ed), *Sangken, Agricultural Festival of Arunachal Pradesh, Takhe Kani*, Hanagar, 1995, p. 63.
9. Kondniya, Buddhist Ceremony and Festivals in Khamti Society, *Arunachal News*, Vol. 5. No. 9, 1977, p. 15.
10. Kondniya, Monastic Buddhism among the Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh, *op cit*, p. 71.
11. S. Dutta Choudhury (ed.), *Arunachal Pradesh District Gazetteers, Lohit District*, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, 1978, p. 77.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. B. Tripalhy & S. Dutta, "Buddhism among the Singphos", *Dialogue* Vol. 6, No. 4, 2005.

16. Vide interview with Ven Agadhama. Head Monk of Namsai Parijotti Sasana Bodh Vihara. dated 15.06.2003.
17. S. Dutta Choudhury (ed.), *op. cit.* p. 79.
18. Kondniya, "Buddhist Ceremony and Festivals in Khamti Society", *op. cit.*
19. Kondinya, "Role of Religion in Khamti Society", *Arunachal News*, Vol. No. 6, No. 3. 1977, p. 8.