

The Tai-Khamtis of Northeast India: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

Dr. Pallabi Devi¹, Prantar Kashyap²

¹Assistant Professor, Jagiroad College

²Research Scholar, USTM

Abstract:

The Tai-Khamtis of Northeast India represent a unique convergence of South and Southeast Asian cultural traditions. As practitioners of Theravāda Buddhism and speakers of a Tai language, they embody a distinctive identity within the multicultural landscape of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. This secondary data-based research paper draws upon historical accounts, linguistic studies, and anthropological literature to analyze the migration history, language, religious practices, social life, and contemporary challenges of the Tai-Khamtis. The paper argues that while the Tai-Khamtis continue to uphold their religious and cultural traditions, they are also negotiating adaptation and resilience in the context of globalization and socio-political change.

Keywords: Tai khamti, History, Society, Culture, Preservation and Modernity.

Introduction:

Tai Khamtis are one of the richest tribes of North-East India in terms of their historically, socially and culturally. They are mainly concentrated in Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh but a little part of the group spread in Assam also. Khamti" word is the combination of two words, "Kham" and "Ti". Literally, Kham the means gold and Ti means region or place. As a whole, the meaning of the word is the region or place of gold. According to another version, Kham means "to adhere to" and Ti means "a place or a country". According to some historians the Tai-Khamti people migrated to India from the Irrawaddy valley, Myanmar, in 1751 (Rahman, 2005). The Khamti people are a part of the great Shan race, migrated to Assam only in the second half of the 18th century (Gogoi, 1971). The first Tai Khamti kingdom was in Sadiya, Assam. In Assam, they spread in Narayanpur of Lakhimpur district and Tinsukia district. Narayanpur has the largest number of Tai-Khamtis in Assam. There are mostly seven villages in Lakhimpur district namely, Bor-Khamti gaon, Deotola, Barpathar, Tunijan, Tipling, Sribhuyan and Barigaon where the language is spoken. The Tai Khamtis of the region showing their own identity by giving cultural and social harmony.

Assamese ethnic groups include the Khamti, who are of the Tai race. A broad branch of the Mongoloid family is referred to by the generic name Tai. They were the first people to live in west China before moving north of Burma in ancient times. They arrived in Assam in the 18th

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century and made Tengapani, which is south of Sadiya, their home. They are currently mostly found in the districts of Changlung, Trirap, and Lohit in Arunachal Pradesh, as well as Narayanpur in the Lakhimpur district of Assam. They speak the Tai Khamti language and are Buddhists.

In the northeastern part of India, a wide variety of tribes continue to use and believe in their traditional medical system to prevent illness and preserve health. One such tribal group is the Tai Khamtis, who have their own traditional healthcare systems and typically rely more on their local customs than on contemporary medicine. This ethnically diverse group has long-standing medical knowledge to treat a range of illnesses. For example, the Narayanpur Khamtis are well-known in the area for their ability to treat dog and snake bites. People travel great distances to seek healing from the local healers. Despite their migration to Assam, they have managed to preserve their cultural identity. The Tai Khamtis have very limited educational resources.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The works of distinguished academics such as Lila Gogoi, M. Neog, P. Gogoi, and E.T. Dalton, who write about Tai culture, language, ethnology, politics among the Khamtis, and other topics. Asomar Sanskriti and Buddha Sanskriti entrusted Khamti religion, language, art, and culture through "Tai Sanskritir Ruprekha." The Khamti culture is discussed in "Asomar Janajatiya Sanskriti," which is written in the book "Asamiya Sanskriti," which was edited by H. Neog and B.M. Das.

M. Neog's work, "A Buddhist Tribe of Assam: The Khamtis," addressed the Khamti faith. In the book "Asomar Janajati," edited by P. C. Bhattacharyee, he includes a note on "Khamti" in which he describes the history, current state, physical characteristics, attire, language, and other aspects of the Khamti group. In the book "The People of India: Assam, edited by B.K. Bordoloi and R.K. Athaparia," Geetanjali Boruah also discusses the subject of "Khamti," establishing nearly every facet of the socioeconomic characteristics of the Khamtis.

Objectives:

This study pursues two main objectives:

1. To examine the historical and cultural significance of the Tai-Khamtis within Northeast India.
2. To assess the contemporary pressures of modernization and identity preservation facing the community.

Methodology:

This paper is based on secondary data drawn from historical sources, anthropological accounts, linguistic studies, and scholarly works on Tai cultures of Northeast India. The research employs a descriptive and analytical approach to synthesize existing literature on the Tai-Khamtis. No fieldwork or primary data collection was undertaken; instead, emphasis is placed on reviewing, comparing, and interpreting published materials to construct a comprehensive understanding

of the community's past and present. The approach is historical, cultural, and comparative in scope, situating the Tai-Khamtis within broader Tai and Buddhist networks of Asia.

Discussion and Major Findings

Historical Background

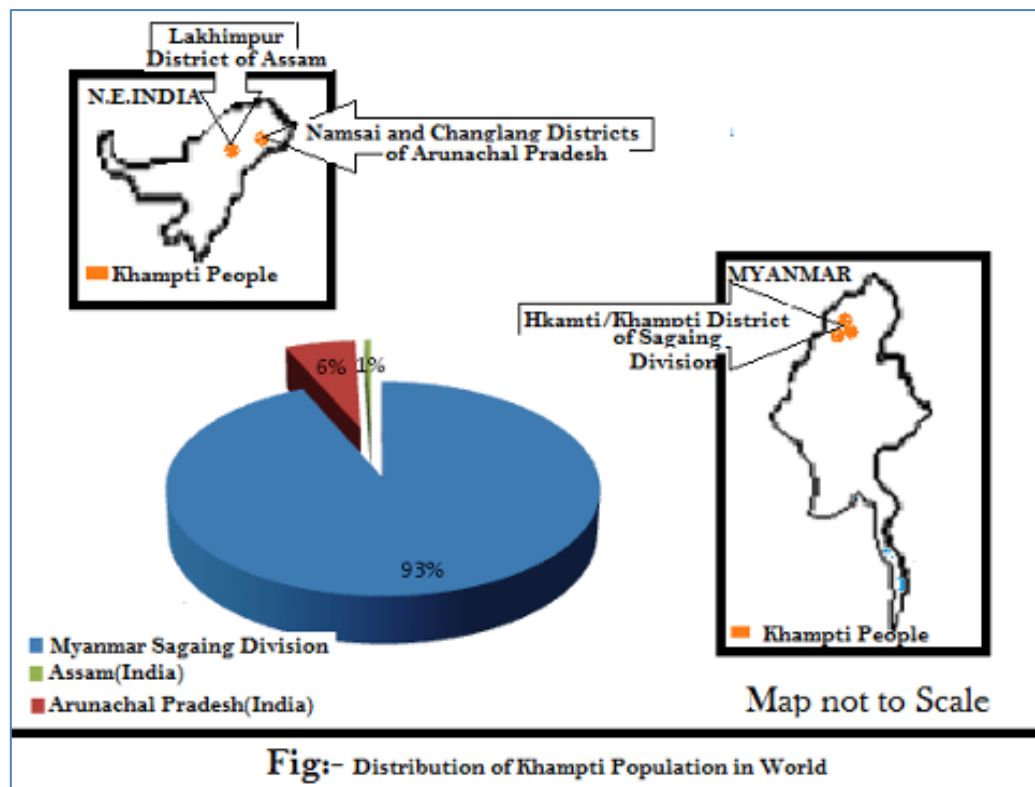
The Tai-Khamtis migrated from the Shan states of Upper Burma (present-day Myanmar) into Northeast India in the 18th century (Baruah, 1992). This movement was influenced by socio-political unrest, warfare, and the desire for new fertile lands. Their earliest settlements in the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh established them as significant cultivators of wet rice and as a martial group with organized military skills. Unlike the Ahoms—another Tai-speaking group in Assam who gradually assimilated into the Assamese Hindu cultural sphere—the Khamtis preserved their religious and linguistic distinctiveness (Gupta, 2012). Their rebellion against the British in 1839, known as the Khamti Rebellion of Sadiya, is a striking example of their assertion of autonomy. 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.

The Khamptis have unique social and cultural characteristics that make them more than merely a tribe. The tribe has a rich history to remember in addition to their own traditions and rituals. The history of the Khampti Tribe begins in China in the sixth century AD, when two royal successors, Khun-Lu and Khun-Lai, founded the Mung-Hee and Mung-Hum (Khampti) as two distinct Tai Kingdoms. In 608 AD, Khun-Lai's eldest son, Ai-Khun-Long, established the Mong-Kong, another Tai kingdom in Burma (Myanmar). Ai-Khun-Long's descendant Kham-Tyap-Pha moved to the north and established the kingdom of Moa-Long or Moa-Pong in the lush Cinduin River region.

Up to the end of the 12th century, the Phake, Ahoms, Khamyangs, Khamptis, and other Shan tribes coexisted harmoniously there. When the Ahoms began to migrate to Assam through Pangsau Pass a century later, the Khamptis also moved further north, establishing the groundwork for their brand-new, independent region in Putao Burma known as Mung-Khampti-Long or Bor-Khampti. The Mong-Kong suzerainty was widely respected despite the kingdom being split up into seven principalities. However, the Khamptis began to suffer from some serious tragedies that destroyed their tranquility by the middle of the 18th century. The 'Kongboung' dynasty was founded by King Alamphra, who annexed the states and used the divide and conquer strategy to split up the Khampti territory and other Shan territories in upper Burma.

In addition to Alamphara, his four immediate successors were likewise unwaveringly vipereous. The Mong-Kong king escaped and sought safety in China when the Burmese army invaded Siam, Manipur, and Northern Tai land. The Khamptis and other tribes migrated and settled near the Sutiya region as a result. As a result, there is disagreement among historians over the myth of the Khamptis' last immigration to northeast India. The end of the war between the Khampti princes and the Burmese rulers, however, can be seen as the migration's final straw. They first made their home in Arunachal Pradesh, beside the Tengapani River.

Eventually, the Khamptis began to live close to the Tengapani and Noa Dihing embankments in the lower



Language and Literature:

The Tai-Khamtis are one of the smallest Tai ethnic groups of North-East India. They have their own script, called Lik-Tai, which resembles the script used by the Mon in southern Myanmar.

The Tai-Khamti language, belonging to the Southwestern Tai branch, remains a key marker of identity. It is written in the Khamti script, a derivative of Shan, and used historically for Buddhist texts, moral tales, and chronicles. Though endangered today, the language embodies a rich oral tradition of folktales, proverbs, and Buddhist Jataka stories. Revitalization projects led by scholars such as Morey (2010) have focused on digital documentation, school-level teaching, and archiving manuscripts. These initiatives are crucial, as UNESCO recognizes the Tai-Khamti language as endangered.

Religion and Belief Systems:

Theravāda Buddhism forms the spiritual and cultural backbone of the Tai-Khamtis. Their monasteries (viharas) act as hubs of education, manuscript preservation, and cultural instruction (Phukan, 1996). Buddhist monks (phra) provide religious leadership, while festivals such as Poi Sangken (water festival) mark renewal, purification, and social unity. Other ceremonies, such as ordination rites and funerary rituals, link the community's worldview to Buddhist teachings. Animistic practices—such as spirit propitiation—persist, reflecting older traditions that coexist with Buddhism. Traditional the Khamti beliefs that they live in a world

inhabited not only by human beings but by spirit and gods of various kind. The world of spirit is thousands of types and is larger than the human world (Nang Sulina Chautang).

Dresses and Ornaments:

The Khamti men wear a shirt known as 'siu pachai' and a lungi known as 'phanoi.' The women wear a blouse 'siu pasao' a long skirt 'sinn' and a cloth used as scarf called 'famia'. Pha-Huo: Pha huo is a traditional Tai khamti turban and part of the traditional attire of many ethnic groups. Pha huo literally means "headdress" in Tai language. Suea Hatt Tuo: This is an outer garment wear over the shirt similarly like half jacket. This garment is worn only during ceremonies and festivals. The distinctive feature of Suea Hatt Tuo is that they often have gold gilded decoration, with floral works and precious gems, which can be somehow recognizable as Tai Khamti style.

Jewelry includes bright amber earplugs, coral, beaded necklaces, silver hairpins, bangles, and gold ornaments. Khamti men traditionally tattoo their bodies.

Social and Cultural Practices:

The Tai-Khamtis follow a clan-based social structure with kinship bonds regulating marriage, inheritance, and labor. Their traditional attire—the phanoi and turban for men, and the sinn (sarong) for women—demonstrates aesthetic and cultural pride. Weaving and textiles remain a symbol of women's artistry, while cuisine highlights rice, fermented foods, and bamboo shoots. The Khamti dance-drama tradition, often staged during festivals, dramatizes Buddhist stories with elaborate costumes, music, and ritualized gestures.

Marriage system of Tai Khamtis:

The marriage ceremony of the tribe called "Lap Thop Magla" in their own language. Their marriage ceremony is unique in nature. They support monogamy marriages rather than Polygamy marriages.

Housing type of Khamti people:

In his study, P.R. Gurdon describes how the Khamtis reside in somewhat sizable towns with homes on platforms that are many feet above the earth. A ladder—typically a tree's notched trunk—is used to access the residences. In terms of construction, the residences are sturdy, cozy, and have good roofs. It appears that men, women, and children share a room, yet married individuals have separate chambers. The primary building material is wood, while bamboo is used to some extent. It is supported by wooden pillars.

Depending mostly on the people's financial situation, the walls and floor are either bamboo or wooden planks. According to a long-standing custom, Tai dwellings often face south. Typically, a house has two doors: the main door on the south side and a second door on the west side. Depending on their function, each chamber of the house has a unique name. 'Chan' is the Tai term for the floor in the front of the house that faces directly south. In most homes, there is a prayer room where people pray every morning and evening while presenting food (khao tang som) and flowers (nam taw yongli). Traditionally, the Tai-Khamti people have been peaceful.

Customs and Cultural Diffusion:

Nonetheless, research from the twenty-first century shows that the Khamptis are one of the most unique tribes. The Khampti people are recognized for their peaceful disposition and their keen involvement in agriculture. People have learnt to apply Theravada Buddhism to every part of their lives, making it more than just a theology. Their traditions and conventions strongly reflect this. It is impossible to envision a typical Khampti village without a Vihara or Chang and Buddhist Bhikhu at its heart. Individual prayer rooms are always included in thatched-roomed homes with raised floors, where Nam Taw Yangli and Khao Tang Sam are offered every morning and evening. Uppakutta worship, the Sangken festival, and the Poi Lu Lik custom demonstrate how the Khamptis have incorporated Buddhism into their secular lives. Priests live within the temple during Sangken festivities, and citizens forbid all bad practices. The Buddha statue is splashed with pure water, signifying purity. In the backdrop of Arunachal Pradesh, Khamptis have managed to preserve their Shan identity despite decades of being removed from their roots. They are still connected to Burmese religious leaders. It is considered a wonderful event when a Buddhist priest from Burma shows up. Since they are the only Tai-speaking tribe living in India, the Khamptis' distinctiveness can also be explained by their language. Shan is credited with creating the Khampti language and alphabetic scripts. However, the language has developed several unique features as a result of centuries of geographic remoteness. Additionally, the Lik Tai script differs from the traditional Shan script in that it asserts that the Khamptis are the only tribe in Arunachal Pradesh with their own alphabetic text.

Modern education has also gained widespread acceptance, which aligns with the foundation of ancient traditions and practices. Khampti people have mastered the knack of maintaining a simple lifestyle in the modern era. In order to maintain their long-standing identity amidst the wave of modernization, the golden people of the golden region had so envisioned a varied way of blending. In light of the current westernization tendency, the term "Khampti" refers to a genuine way of life that even Westerners have recognized, rather than just a tribe or a language.

Art, Architecture, and Material Culture:

The Khamti are renowned for their craftsmanship. Their swords, known as pha-nap, are prized, and their priests are amateur craftsmen who carve religious statues from wood, bone, or ivory. The monasteries of the Tai-Khamtis reflect Burmese and Shan architectural traditions, often constructed in wood with tiered roofs and carved interiors. Artistic traditions include gilded Buddha images, painted manuscripts, and bamboo crafts such as basketry and mats. These objects are not merely aesthetic but embody religious devotion and practical ingenuity.

Table 1: Major Cultural Features of the Tai-Khamtis

Domain	Key Characteristics
Language	Tai-Khamti (Southwestern Tai), written in Khamti script; endangered but revitalized

Religion	Theravāda Buddhism with elements of animism; monasteries as cultural hubs
Festivals	Poi Sangken (water festival), ordination ceremonies, merit-making rituals
Art & Architecture	Wooden monasteries with Burmese influence, gilded Buddha images, manuscript art
Social Life	Clan-based structure, endogamy, rice-based economy, weaving and textiles
Performance Arts	Dance-dramas depicting Buddhist stories, music with drums and cymbals

Contemporary Issues:

Today, the Tai-Khamtis confront the pressures of modernization, globalization, migration, and cultural assimilation. Language shift is accelerating, with younger generations prioritizing Assamese, Hindi, and English for education and jobs. There is an urgent need for documentation and preservation efforts because the Tai languages, including Khamti, are listed by UNESCO as "Severely Endangered" and attempt to revive them has not been very successful. Similarly, religious observances face decline as urban lifestyles alter participation in rituals. At the same time, there is resilience and revival: cultural organizations promote Tai-Khamti heritage, festivals are celebrated with renewed vigor, and scholars document endangered traditions. Although the Tai Khamti community is knowledgeable about their herbal remedies, the survival of their ancient ethnomedicinal traditions is threatened by modern Western medicine. This tension between preservation and adaptation defines their negotiation with modernity.

Conclusion

This secondary data-based study highlights the Tai-Khamtis as a community whose cultural heritage links South Asia and Southeast Asia. Their migration from the Shan states of Myanmar into Arunachal Pradesh and Assam reflects a history of adaptation, while their devotion to Theravāda Buddhism, preservation of language and literature, and artistic traditions illustrate their cultural resilience. On the basis of the discussion it reveals that the Tai-Khamtis are not only guardians of an endangered cultural legacy but also active participants in negotiating modern identity. Despite threats such as language loss, assimilation pressures, and declining traditions, the Tai-Khamtis have shown agency in sustaining their heritage through festivals, education, and cultural associations. Their case emphasizes the broader theme of indigenous resilience in the face of modernity and calls for more scholarly and policy-level attention.

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