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IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING MYANMAR CULTURE AND HISTORY TO UNDERSTAND INDIA'S NORTHEAST REGION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ARUNACHAL PRADESH OF INDIA*

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I. Myanmar and Northeast India

The present writing is based on some of the observations that I made in my valedictory address in a Two-Day Seminar "Aspects of Community Development in the North-East Indian States", organized by the Kolkata Society for Asian Studies(KSAS) on 10-11 December, 2014. A plethora of literature is available on Northeast India, a part of India, which is often considered as unique, different from the mainland. The term "Northeast India" was however not used and known when we were young. Indeed, so far my memory goes— during early 1950s and 1960s at Santiniketan we were often entertained with performances of Manipuri and Naga dancers and Assamese singers. This was also the time when India and Myanmar (then called Burma) were in close contact; Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu, Prime Ministers of our two countries, were closest friends. For the British, Assam and the eastern frontier with Burma appeared strategically most important, and at the same time vulnerable due to the region's proximity with China. The vast area covered by deep forest and partly inaccessible terrain were source of economic opportunity. At the same time also source of unknown trouble; thus, they followed the "Policy of Exclusion" , according to which special rules and regulations were to be formed and applied for this region. The Hill-Plains dichotomy corresponding the Tribal-non Tribal one was just a myth. This myth was created to actually exploit the Hill people, and to isolate them from the mainlanders. The post- Independence Indian State was challenged by the Naga insurgency. The formidable legacy of this revolt is still keeping the policy makers busy and the common people suffer. During 1960s-1970s and early 1980s, Mizos - also known as Lushais- took to arms. Indeed, from 1980s onwards all the states were facing the problem of insurgency in some form or the other. The post-colonial scenario in Myanmar was also not a happy one. The similar kind of challenges, indeed, even in greater intensity, rocked the country along the border with Thailand and China in particular. So far the western frontier along the Indian states were concerned, the situation was somehow of low intensity. Yet, there is no way to ignore the role that Myanmar could play to bring peace and stability in Northeast India. Through various joint endeavours Myanmar and India have made remarkable progress in maintaining peace and tranquillity along the border; the future days will see more economic movements and easier connectivity. Yet, people to people contact is far from satisfactory. It can prosper only through studying of each others' history, rich in

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continuity and plurality. The Sagai state and the Chin Hills of Myanmar may be less developed than our Nagaland and Mizoram. Yet, linguistic and cultural plurality and wealth are remarkable in both the countries.

This essay deals with little known history of Northeast region within the context of migration of various ethnic groups from Myanmar. This migration itself is a result of yet another massive migration of people from further up, precisely, from China on the one hand, and Thailand on the other. In either case, a country like Myanmar with an old civilization of its own had to be crossed over. And, here lies exactly the importance of studying the history and culture of Myanmar[1] in the context of eastern and north eastern parts of India. Leaving aside those up-hill areas of Kachin dominated northern, Karen dominated eastern, and Chin dominated western parts, bordering respectively with China, Thailand and India, the valley dwellers like the Mons, Rakhines (Arakanese) and the Bamars (Burmans) quite often than not got involved in conflicts having its spill over effect on various parts of south eastern Bangladesh and north eastern India.

Contrary to the popular notion of Sinitic dominance, a number of ethnic groups (tribes) from north eastern states of India prove within themselves presence of a strong Austric element; the Khasis of Assam and Meghalaya for example. Certainly, the Austric people absorbed Sinitic migrants, though such absorption might not always been without conflict over land and water. As will be shown below with the example of the Khamtis, Theravada Buddhism played an extremely important role in this process of acculturation. Buddhism being an open domain, adopted worship of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. This was not only the case with Mahayana faith; even Theravada followers, as will be shown below, were attracted to worship Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Trade, pilgrimage, migration of craftsmen, demand for experts in Hindu rituals, astrology, alchemy etc. for the royal courts or for common masses brought the two countries, India and Myanmar, together.

Extremely rich archaeological sites scattered in various parts of upper and lower Myanmar speak for this unique story of confluence of ideas[2]. Of all the states of north eastern India, it was Manipur which stood in closest contact with culture zones in upper Myanmar. Manipuri Brahmins were revered across the border for their scholarship in Sanskrit, especially in astrology.

Volumes of ethnographical literature written by the British administrators in major part is a rich source for understanding of the life and culture of the people of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Yet, few authors spoke of this cultural kinship between India and Myanmar (Burma). This is quite understandable: the discipline, called 'Anthropology', divides the people of India into three categories: Hindus, Muslims and Tribals. More important appears to me to look at Myanmar and India as a single cultural-linguistic domain. Both have adopted elements from the Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, Sino-Tibetan, and Indo-Aryan or Sanskritic culture and civilization.

II. A Short Profile of History and Culture of Myanmar

Myanmar is the country with which the people of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Manipur share common heritage in terms of ethnic affiliation, material and spiritual culture, as well as other assets of civilization. The above mentioned four states share a boundary of

about 1600 km. with Myanmar. Myanmar, an ethnically diverse country like India, has seven states and seven divisions. The seven states are ethnically arranged, though there are many divisions within the single ethnic group, after which the concerned state itself is named. On both sides along the border of the two neighbouring countries live linguistic groups like the Nagas, Lushais (Mizos)[3], Kukis[4] (called Chins in Myanmar), etc. They speak common languages, follow similar social customs and traditions maintained through generations. Above all, they possess hereditary skill in the fields of material culture: basketry, handloom, metal work, etc.[5]

The Chin Hills of Myanmar, Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh and the Lushai Hills of India have shared many common experiences in course of their process of state formation at the bottom. In Bangladesh, the Marmas and Chakmas follow a number of social norm and tradition which have their origin in Myanmar. Myanmar shares a common historical legacy; the vast domain of Hindu-Buddhist cultural realm stretching from *Brahmadesh* (Prome in Upper Myanmar) down to Bengal— is rich not only with myth and legend, but with archaeological, literary and other sources. A student of Asian history should not be misguided by the myth of isolationist Indo-Mongoloid "otherness", but should try to go deep into the paradigm of "History from below". Only multi-disciplinary approach with intensive field research can reveal the true rhythm of Indo-Myanmar cultural continuum. The true story of mutual exchange of thoughts and intermingling have not been told yet.

The political history of Myanmar is full of struggle for supremacy within several ethnic groups over the most fertile land, precisely, the Irrawaddy valley. The rivers like Sittang, Salween and Kaladan too attracted various ethnic groups who were desperately looking for fertile river valleys to get permanently settled. Lucrative appeared also the trade routes; to monopolize the overland trade from China to India meant a great deal in terms of economic empowerment. Major groups involved in this process of state formation from below were the Bamars (Burmans), the Shans, the Rakhines (Arakanese) and the Mons. The ethnic groups like Karens, Kachins, Kayas, Chins, Nagas, Lahus, Was and others contributed to make the frontier all around strong. Buddhism remained the common faith of the Bamars, the Shans, the Rakhines and the Mons, while a large number of Karens, Kachins, Chins and other groups remained faithful to their original animistic beliefs until a major part got converted to Christianity.

The classical period of state building in Myanmar found a systematic beginning with the rise of Pagan Empire in the heart of Myanmar. The most powerful king Anawrahta (1044-1077) is credited to have successfully defeated the Mons (also called Talaings)[6] of Lower Myanmar, thereby laying the foundation of a Bamar dominated empire, situated exactly at the crossroad between China and India. These Bamar people, (also known as Burmans) which make the majority group, are the same, whom, we see coming down from China in waves towards the Brahmaputra valley. Another important group was the Shans. The name "Shan" is derived from the Sanskrit word *shyam* (dark), which ultimately relates them to the Austric people of Asia. After all, Thailand or *Shyamadesh*, together with Lower Myanmar once made the Dvaravati kingdom.[7] This was part of the *Suvarnabhumi*, peopled by the Austric Mons, rather than Sinic Bamars. The Pagan empire, though mostly projected as predominantly

Bamar empire, owes a great deal to the Mons. After all, the Bamars got their Theravada Buddhism from the coastal Mons of Lower Myanmar. But, no less important were the earlier Pyus. The Pyus were basically Sinic in origin, but embraced Buddhism which was highly accommodative towards Hinduism. A visit to the museum in the Pyu archaeological site in Prome in the year 2009 convinced me of this highly mixed nature of the Pyu civilization. Later, the Pyus got somehow lost, or mingled, as the Mranma (Burman) people emerged as the most dominating. The greatest king of Pagan Anawrahta (Sanskrit : Aniruddha), himself was believed to have been converted to Theravada faith by a Mon monk, called Shin Arahan. Thousands of temples across the Pagan site speak for the affluence of the ruling kings and elites. Yet, such a mighty empire was destroyed around 1283 A.D. by the invasion of the Mongols from southwest China. The Mongol army was led by none other than Kublai Khan. The invading army of the Mongols however had to retreat, most likely, due to excessive heat and shortage of food supply. The Shans, a formidable rival of the Bamars, went on increasing their strength, though the Mons were not sitting idle. The Mon king Dhammaceti (1472-92), seeing the decline of Buddhism in India, strengthened relation with Buddhist Sri Lanka. He is remembered for a rigorous reform of Theravada Buddhist order, the details of which is inscribed on the famous Kalyani Inscription. Buddhism thus remained the central faith, through which every ruler struggled to legitimize the right to rule over.

On the other hand, the post Pagan Toungoo period saw supremacy of the Shans. As Ava declined slowly, Arakan and Pegu rose; the glory of the Rakhine (Arakanese) kingdom reached its zenith in the 16th-17th centuries.[8] Yet, the North-South Divide and conflict remained as ever; the King Tabinshwehti of Toungoo dynasty in 1538 marched towards Pegu, for, Pegu was strategically most important centre in view of the trade towards East (Thailand, Malay), as well as towards the West, the Indian Ocean. Facing humiliating defeat, Mons of Pegu fled to Prome in Upper Myanmar. The Shans, however, supported the Mons; Shan *Sawbwa*s (Shan chiefs) came down with huge army to Prome to help the Mons to recapture their kingdom.[9] King Tabinshweti and his General Bayinnaung of Toungoo dynasty were inspired by the Ottomans of Turkey and the Mughals of India.[10] Inspired by these two great Muslim empires, they too wanted to expand their sphere of influence emanated from the Buddhist ideals of emancipation. Thus, during that time we see modern Thailand, Laos, Manipur, Kachar and Jaintia Hills under the impact of Myanmar. Lower Myanmar was important for the sea route and trade through water, while Upper Myanmar was important for trade going on overland between China and India. Here, precisely lies the importance of Assam and other states from the Northeast. Constant war within the groups, as has been mentioned above, caused huge emigration of people from Upper Myanmar towards Assam and adjoining areas on the one hand, and towards Chittagong Plains and Hills via Arakan on the other. The steady rise of the Bamars (Burmans) marginalizing the Mons and the Shans went on and on. However, the most significant turn in the history of Myanmar was visible with the rise of the Alaungpaya dynasty in the 18th century. The Buddhist identity became so very vital for this dynasty that this first founder- king's name was chosen in such a way as to legitimise his rule as a divine one: the word Alaungpaya means "embryo Buddha".

Alaungpaya's son Bodawpaya put his claim to rule not only Myanmar, but also all lands on both sides: Manipur on the West and Thailand on the East. Conflict over occupation of

royal thrown of Manipur gave the proper opportunity. For example, when Chaurajit and Marjit, two sons of the Manipur king Jai Singh, were caught into conflict over capturing royal power, Myanmar king Bodawpaya's (1779-1819) intervention was sought. This reconciliation did not last long; from 1812 for about six years only Manipur and Myanmar kingdoms passed peaceful and prosperous time. In later days too, the Myanmar kings remained engaged in Manipur.[11]

War, conflict, peace- making and reconciliation are things universal; history of many countries have the same story to tell. Such events caused transportation of ideas, cultural assets including dance, songs, musical instrument etc. This was exactly the case between Upper Myanmar and Manipur. Also, this happened between Ayuthia (old capital of Thailand) and Ava. The kings of Myanmar enriched their courts with dancers and musicians from Manipur and Ayuthia. On the other hand, astrologers, Brahmin Pundits and various knowledge bearers from India adorned the courts of the Myanmar kings. Any visitor to Myanmar today, especially in big cities like Mandalay and Yangon can see descendants of such royal guests. They are known with the name *Ponnya*. They are quite respected among the ordinary people, though they do not mix up otherwise with Myanmar people, and are very conscious of their racial "purity". I may just mention that all sections of Myanmar people have high regard for Sanskrit and Pali scholarship, and look at India, eastern India in particular (Manipur, Assam, Bihar and Bengal in particular) as the land of knowledge and culture. The knowledge road between eastern India and Upper Myanmar was stretched from Navadvipa in Bengal via Manipur to Mandalay. In view of this, it is no wonder that the Upper Myanmar region, the so called dry zone (*Tattabhumi*), was known as the heartland of *Brahmadesh*.

III. Immigration, Geographical Distribution, Linguistic Ramifications and Cultural Exchange between Myanmar and India

The Sino-Tibetan linguistics is a subject over which I have, but only limited command;[12] yet, one finds, so far linguistic world is concerned, a common phenomenon between India and Myanmar, correspondingly, Sanskrit and Mranma/Myanmar language. In both the cases, spontaneous accommodation of non-Sanskritic and non- Myanmar (non-Burmese) elements is visible; this could not have been otherwise, as those minority linguistic groups were indeed once the dwellers of the river valleys and were in possession of the fertile lands and rich natural resources. No other work has better demonstrated this with the example of the Kachins as *Edmond Leach's Political System of Highland Burma*. In this book Leach has successfully broken the theory of "perceived comparative superiority" of the Shans against the Kachins. With examples from two different kinship system, *Gumlao* and *Gumsa*, Leach has shown cases of overlapping. The category " Gumsa" being hierarchical, was able to integrate linguistic plurality of several groups in favour of a higher ranking language group. The *Gumlao* system's more republican character made the language groups exist side by side, precisely, horizontally with their identity at local level. [13] Here, with a mood of drawing parallel I could only mention that such a myth of "perceived cultural superiority" also exists among the Ahoms against Bodos, Nagas etc. However, this linguistic identity and individuality among all the cross border tribes, cutting across national boundaries of India (in this case N.E. India) and Myanmar, is common. In each of the states of Northeast India, there exist

numerous languages; for each of the language, the speakers carry a history that binds them with Myanmar; in the case of the Tai-Ahom community, to Thailand. In the present section, with the example of the Khamtis we will see how the Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh brought back from Myanmar, cultural and linguistic assets which actually went from coastal India through early trade.

The origin of the Khamti script[14] goes back to Shan script, which should be traced back to South Indian Pallava script. The Theravada Buddhism of Myanmar model is yet another area which needs to be looked at from this perspective.[15] The Sino-Tibetan languages can be classified into two major groups: Tibeto-Burman and Siamese –Chinese. In the context of the present discussion the first becomes more relevant, as we are to deal with India, a home of a large number of Tibeto-Burman groups and sub-groups. According to S.K Chatterjee,[16] the Tibeto Burmans are divided into following subgroups:

1) Tibetan which includes Ladakhi, Sikkimese, Bhutanese etc.
2) The Himalayan Group of dialects: Newari, Murmi, Kiranti , Lepcha etc.
3) The pronominalised Himalayan dialects which show some influence of Austric, spoken in various parts of eastern Punjab Himalayas and parts of Nepal
4) The North Assam Group under which come languages like Aka, Miri, Abor , Dafla, Mishmi
5) The Assam Burmese group under which come speeches of North and East Bengal, Assam and Myanmar (Burma). Indeed, a whole range of languages starting from Garo, Kachari, Tipra, Tangkhul, Konyak, Kabui, Kuki-Chin, Lushai, Meiti, Kachin-Lolo of Myanmar, standard Myanmar come under the coverage.

The Siamese Chinese branch of Sino-Tibetan includes Chinese with its dialects and Siamese with Dai (Thai), Siamese proper, Lao, Shan, Khamti and Ahom. North eastern India was predominantly a land of the Kiratas, as they were called in our classical literature, *Mahabharata*, *Purana* etc. This is why the great linguist Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji names his book *Kirata Jana Kriti : The Indo-Mongoloids : Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India*. The Kiratas were partly mountain, forest and cave dwellers, yet, intimately interacted with the people of the plains, who were early settlers in the river valleys. A large number of them were Austric who were in the process of adopting the Sanskritic culture. The Kiratas learned Hindu –Buddhist social norms from them. The Sinic people mastered the art of trade, their children got married with the Indic *(Kula*) people. Occasionally, their role was projected as fearsome, ferocious and imposing in and around the eastern Himalayas. That the Sinic people, described as *Kiratas* or *Cina*s in Sanskrit, were actually the Mongoloid in their racial affiliation—does not need to be mentioned. Driven by the cold and dry weather of China including Tibet, they felt attracted to warm weather and fertile land of Irrawaddy and Brahmaputra.[17] The Indian faith, like Hinduism and Buddhism gave the Sinic people a cultural anchor, which they needed badly after being uprooted from their own soil.

The most impressive case of Indianization of this displaced Sinic groups can be witnessed in the way the Ahoms, otherwise a branch of the Tai group of the great Sino-Tibetan family, embraced Hinduism. They established the Ahom rule in Assam in the 13th century, indeed at a point of time when Bengal saw decline in state power and fell under the political power of Islam. Embracing Hinduism, the Ahom rulers continued their authority over a large part of

Assam until the 19th century. The Ahom rule came to its end only after the British annexed Assam in 1826, in the same year when the First Anglo-Burmese War was fought. The following section will demonstrate how one of the relatives of the Ahoms, the Khamtis, continue the legacy of cultural heritage of the great Shan race of Myanmar.

IV. Indo-Myanmar Cultural Continuum : A case study from Arunachal Pradesh

This section dealing with the Khamtis of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh of India can be considered as a continuation of my earlier work on this particular Buddhist people of Northeastern India. The article 'Migration, Acculturation and Integration of Myanmar Tribes in India: Khamtis and Singhphos of Arunachal Pradesh' dealt with both, the Khamtis and the Singphos, showing their ethnic linkage with their co-brethren in Myanmar: the Shans and the Kachins respectively.[18] In this section, the Singphos appear only marginally, while the Khamtis take the centre stage along with its age-old contact with India.

Before Arunachal Pradesh was awarded Statehood in February 1987, it was known as Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA). British anthropologist, Verrier Elwin, who was a close friend of our first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and an advisor on the Northeast affairs, made this state widely known through his works. In January 1972, NEFA became a separate Union Territory and was renamed 'Arunachal Pradesh', which means 'the land of the rising sun'. Unlike other Northeastern states, such as Nagaland and Mizoram (formerly Lushai Hills), this state never experienced any serious insurgency. Yet, the state remains and perhaps will continue to be one of the most sensitive states of India, mainly due to its geographical position bordering China and China's totally irrational claim over this part of India.

Arunachal Pradesh shares boundaries with China including Tibet (north and northeast boundary of 1,8080 km), Bhutan (west 160 km boundary), and Myanmar (East 440 km boundary). The state has snow mountains in the north, and goes down to the plains of Brahmaputra valley in the south. It is nearly 84,000 sq. km in area with its 20 (twenty) districts: 1) Tawang 2) West Kameng 3) East Kameng 4) Papum Pare 5) Lower Subansiri 6) Kurung Kumey 7) Kra Daadi 8) Upper Subansiri 9) West Siang 10) East Siang 11) Upper Siang 12) Dibang Valley 13) Lower Dibang Valley 14) Lohit 15) Namsai 16) Anjaw 17) Changlang 18) Tirap 19) Longding 20) Siang. There have been some changes in the arrangement of district: Lohit has been divided into Lohit and Anjaw, while a new district called Papumpare has been carved out of a single district of Lower Subansiri. The state capital is Itanagar, which is about 12 hours' bus journey from Assam's capital Guwahati.

Out of 61,400 Buddhists (1971 census) of Arunachal Pradesh, 41,430 or 67.5 per cent belong to the category of 'Tribes' of Arunachal Pradesh. This shows that the indigenous Buddhist population is still quite high; they have not been overshadowed by migrant Buddhists. Both the major schools of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, are living forces in this state. While the Monpas and Sherdukpens, among others, make up a major group of Mahayanists (followers of Tibetan Lamaism), the Khamtis and Sighphos of upper Assam, Changlang, and Lohit constitute the group of the Theravadins. Other resident tribes or groups are Akas, Adis, Nishis, Daflas, Miris, Mishmi, Noctes, Wanchos, Tangas, Apatanis and a small group of Lisus. The Lisus are living in southwestern China as well. The number of Buddhist population in Arunachal Pradesh in 1981 was 86,483. According to the 1991 census, the Buddhist

population of Arunachal Pradesh[19] was 111,372. Elements of Vaishnavism visible among some of the groups should remind us that God Vishnu had a prominent presence in the religious domain of not only Myanmar, but also Thailand. The ancient Upper Myanmar city of *Beikthano* (Vishnu city) reminds us of the significant place of Lord Vishnu in the spiritual domain of ancient Myanmar. Major tribes in the regions of Subansiri and Siang worship Doini-Pole (Sun-Moon God). Nature worship is universal, and has a distinct place in the pre-classical, especially Vedic civilization. Elements of nature worship in the form of Nat cult[20] as known from Myanmar, is found among some groups, for example Singhphos, of Arunachal. Elements of marginal beliefs, like worshipping of various unknown and unseen forces which could be considered as part of the Buddhist world, are also occasionally found.

The Khamtis inhabit in about 30 villages in the lower regions, drained by rivers, Tengapani and Noa-Dihing. A few Khamtis are living in Upper Assam, in the districts of Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar. In 2010 I had the opportunity to visit Namsai area in connection with the dedication of the Golden Pagoda to the people of Arunachal Pradesh by the Hon'ble Minister Chowna Mein and his wife, Member of the Arunachal Pradesh Assembly, Sreemati Sati Mein.

The migration of the Khamtis from Myanmar (Bor Khamti/ Mogaung/Putao), as portrayed by the British ethnographers indicate existence of seven principalities in the Bor Khamti country. They were: Mung-yek, Long-nu, Lang-tu, Lung-king, Man-nau, Man-ci, Man-ce-Khun. Those principalities were under the suzerainty of Mung-kong, a well-known Tai kingdom of medieval Myanmar. According to an oral source, two Tai princes, Khun-lung and Khun lai, established the first Tai kingdom in Yunnan of Southwest China in the year 568 A.D. The kingdom was known as Mung-ri-mung-ram or Mung-wan. Ai-Khun Lung, the eldest son of Khun-lai laid the foundation of the kingdom of Mung-kong in 608 A.D. This kingdom flourished, but faced decline in the eighteenth century with the rise of the king Alaungpaya.

In one of the previous sections I have already shown the impact of the rise of Alungapaya dynasty on Assam and Manipur. The capital of the Mung-kong kingdom was situated only at two and a half mile distance from the present railway station of Maugaung. The word *Mung* means country and *kong* means drum; meaning ' a country plain like the mouth of a drum.[21] Referring to a reliable Ahom source, Lila Gogoi [22]argues that Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam lived three years in Khamti and four years in Khamjang or Kham-yang. Thus, she argues that the Khamtis established themselves in the thirteenth century in the kingdom of Mung-kong. The history of the Khamtis during the period from the thirteenth century up to the rise of the Putao kingdom in Bor Khamti (Khamti major) in the eighteenth century must be most exciting for those who are seriously interested in understanding the history of Northeastern India and Myanmar in a single continuum.

The Myanmar people make a distinction between the Shans of Myanmar, Shans of China and Hkamti Shans. The Chinese Shans are the Shans of the Shan State in Yunnan. The relations between the Chinese and the Shans were not very cordial. For the Chinese, the Shans were the 'barbarians', living south of Yangtze Kiang. In fact, the kingdom of Nanchao, founded approximately, around 649 C.E., in Yunnan in southwestern China, was a Tai kingdom. In order to remain independent of Chinese subjugation, many Shans migrated from China to the region which is now the Shan State in northern Myanmar. According to a modern Thai

historian, Prince Dhani Nivat, Shan migration started twelve centuries ago and continued over several hundreds of years. According to him, the reasons for their migration were 'harassing tide of Chinese cultural if not military pressure'.[23] Manickavasagam[24] is of the opinion that southward migration of the Thais (Shans) had started even earlier, when the kingdom of Nanchao was powerful. However, Kublai Khan's invasion of Nanchao in 1253 intensified the course of exodus of Thai immigrants into the 'Golden land' or swarnabhumi of Indo-China.[25] Ling, one of the most outstanding authorities on Buddhism in India and Southeast Asia, also writes: 'In 1254 Kublai Khan's conquest of the Nanchao kingdom in south west of China had the effect of sending a fresh wave of Thai immigrants south of Nanchao; particularly those who preferred not to remain under Chinese rule but to be free 'Thai'.[26] The Hkamti Shans are looked upon as a sub-type of Burmese (Myanmar) Shan. On historical grounds, the Hkamti Shans showed political allegiance to the former Shan state of Mogaung (Mong Kaweng). Further there were at least four types of Hkamti Shan states

1) Hkamti Long or Putato[27]
2) Hukawang Valley Shans (Maingkawn, Ningbyen, Taro)
3) Singkaling Hkamti (Upper Chindwin)
4) Hkamti of Assam located to the east of Sadiya

Thus, it will be clear how difficult it is to designate the Hkamti as a people of a homogenous ethnic origin and ancestry and to identify the Khamtis as a unified and single political entity. This kind of difficulty will remain if we continue to use the term 'Shans' as a unified category. The elements of Shans are mixed up with elements of non-Shans in Myanmar. The Jingpaw-speaking Kachins were one of the late Tibeto- Burmans from the North during eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They overran the north Burma Shans, causing the disintegration and dispersal among the Shan people of North Myanmar. In spite of various challenges, the Hkamtis or the Shan-Hkamtis continued to remain committed to Buddhism which played as the most effective integrative factor in the Shan Khamti society.

Wilcox was the first to have visited the area, called Khamti Long, or Bor Khamti or Putao from where the Khamtis came into Assam. Wilcox launched this expedition in 1825-28. Readers may be reminded that those were the years of the first Anglo-Burmese War. Wilcox was much impressed by the Buddhist Khamtis as is evident in the following lines: 'The only sign of population that we saw on our journey were parties of priests (Khamtis) moving from one village in the jungle to another'.[28] On entering Assam, Khamtis first settled by a river called Tengapani. During the last decade of the eighteenth century, taking advantage of the trouble in Raja Gourinath Singh's reign, the Khamtis pushed on to Sadiya. The Khamti chief was acknowledged by the Assamese ryots (cultivators) as the ruler, and the former usurped the title, Khawa Gohain or Assamese Governor of Sadiya. This event of impressive advance of the Khamtis has been described by almost all the scholars. The most significant phenomenon appears to be the manner in which the Khamtis subjugated the Assamese people and proclaimed their superiority.

V. Khamtis and their Culture: Some General Observations

The Khamtis profess the Hinayana or Theravada faith after the Burmese model.[29] As early as 1841 William Robinson observed in his 'Descriptive Account of Assam' that 'their

customs appear precisely the same as those of Ava'.[30] The present generation of the Khamtis may not know all the details of the story of their forefathers' migration and such 'Myanmar connection' as we have discussed so far. Yet, through my interactions with the Khamti people, I gathered that the Khamtis in general are well aware of the fact that they possess a rich cultural heritage, which they should foster at all prices. Today, a large number of Khamti people speak Hindi as well as Assamese, while all the Khamti monks are well-versed in Pali, the language of the Theravada Buddhism. I have made this realization while engaged in conversation with Khamti monks in various monasteries of Namsai area of Arunachal Pradesh. In Bodhgaya too, I had an opportunity to discuss Khamti Buddhism with Theravada monks from Arunachal Pradesh, and also with Shan monks with strong Shan Khamti background based in the Shan-Myanmar monastery.

For understanding linguistic situation in eastern and northeastern India R. Shafer's[31] article 'Classification of the Northernmost Naga Languages' deserves attention. He traces the origin of Anga, Vanga and Kalinga to Tibeto-Burmic An, Wan, Kalin or Klin. Those people of eastern India (Ang,Van and Kalin or Klin) who were the closest to the Tibeto-Burmans were called by Shafer as 'Baric People'. These Baric people's linguistic position has been given by Shafer in the following way:

Sinitic (Chinese)

Bodic (old Bodish or classical Tibetan, in modern dialects and most closely related languages of the Himalayan region)

Baric

Burmic (Burmese and related languages, mostly on the Indo-Burmese frontier, in Burma, in western China)

Karenic

Daic (the Thai or Tai languages)

Paul Benedict[32] divides Sino-Tibetans into two broad groups: Chinese and Tibeto-Karen. In his classification, the Tibeto-Burmans come under Tibeto-Karens. Tai (Siamese) for example, is a large linguistic group and contains various speech groups: Thai, Lao, Shan, Khamti and Ahom. Of all these, the Thai and Lao are spoken in Thailand and Laos respectively.

Of all the people of Northeastern India, it is only the Khamtis who have a script of their own. Like all other Sino-Tibetan languages, Khamti as well as the Singpho languages have three distinct features: monosyllabic, tonal and agglutinative. Each word has one syllable only. As readers of this journal are aware, in contrast to Indo-European languages, the Tibeto-Burman languages are tonal; changes in tone bring changes in meaning of words. Sino-Tibetan languages are agglutinative; this means that verbs are not conjugated. Tenses are formed by addition of suffixes to the verb root. Besides, a large number of loan words taken from Myanmar language are also visible in Khamti language.

Grierson says that "Ahom alphabet is an old form of that which, under various forms, is current for Khamti, Shan, Burmese and Chakma. It is more complete than those of Khamti and Shan, but not as complete as those of Burmese and Chakma. It is to be ultimately referred to the alphabet in which Pali was written."[33] Grierson also made comparison between tones as used in the Shan and Khamti languages. Khamti alphabet system consists of nine vowels and 17 consonants.[34] Burmese (Myanmar) language has 12 vowels and 31 consonants. The

number of tones in Burmese is the same as that of Khamti: short, level and heavy. According to Needham's terminology, the three tones of the Khamti language are: natural pitch of the voice, failing tone and abrupt termination.[35] J. F. Needham was Assistant Political Officer of Sadiya Tracts, which is situated between Myanmar (Burma), and India. This is the area which saw Khamti immigration in the eighteenth century. Needham wrote a book entitled *Outline Grammar of the Khamti Language*. The book was printed by the Superintendent Govt. Printing, Rangoon, in 1894. While referring to features of the Khamti language, Grierson mentioned *Cushing's Introduction to Grammar of Shan Language* . The meaning of the word 'Khamti' is 'golden land'. 'Kham' means gold and 'ti' means place. If 'ti' can be considered as a short form of Sanskrit ' asti" (is present) then the meaning becomes 'where there is gold' or 'golden land'. Here comes the subject of *suvarnabhumi*, the golden land, to which mention has been made right in the beginning.

The Khamti society is highly stratified; each group having its own position and economic status. The highest position is enjoyed by chiefs and priests. The erstwhile slaves are at the bottom of the social strata. The Chief is called *Chowfa;* reminding us of the term *Sawbwa*, meaning 'Chief' in Shan language. The Khamtis are divided into several exogamous clans, viz., Namsoom, Nangmao, Manwai, Manpang. The social features that characterize the Khamti society include adherence to Buddhism, wet-rice cultivation, consolidated village life with a monastery (*Chaung*), craftsmanship in metal work and weaving.[36] The word *Chaung* is of Myanmar origin, and means exactly the same, precisely, "monastery". There are two categories of monks, *Chowsra* (principal monks) and *Chowsang* (ordinary monk). The first are principal monks, or *Sthavira*s or *Mahastavira*s as they are called in Pali. The second category is simply *Shraman*s or *Grihatyagi*s.[37] The word *Grihatyagi*, as we all understand, means those who have left their home and live in monastery.

While in Namsai, I utilized the opportunity of visiting the village of Chongkham and the Pali Vidya-Pith. My visit to various other monasteries in the Namsai-Chowkham area has immensely enriched my understanding of the Buddhist Khamti people with their Tai-Shan lineage. Khamtis, in spite of being formally Theravadins, have absorbed some elements of Hindu tradition. The study of Jayanta Sarkar proves the popularity of seasonal festivals by the Khamti people while celebrating the harvest; they even call upon *Brahma* and his wife Goddess *Lakshmi* [38]so that they continue to bestow their grace on the household. The influence of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* on the Khamti people has also been described by other scholars. Again, according to Jayanta Sarkar,[39] Lord Buddha narrates the story of *Mahabharata* to his disciples. In Khamti *Mahabharata,* Yudhisthir has been described as an *avatar* of Lord Buddha. Buddha has been represented up in Khamti tradition in various incarnations. The message in the Khamti *Ramayana* is to follow Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. The law books of the Khamtis, *Thamasat*, are nothing but *Dhammathat* of the Myanmar people. The Myanmar people borrowed it from Manu, the great Indian law maker.[40] Thus, we can witness the full circle through which the religion, culture and civilization wandered across Myanmar and India.

Conclusion

It is the most difficult task indeed to present a true picture with all the complexities

connected with migration and cultural identity formation, played over such a vast region comprising parts of India, southwestern China, Thailand and Myanmar. What concerns is the fact that often Myanmar does not receive the attention it deserves in this discourse. From the cultural and historical point of view, Myanmar comes closest to India. It was not a one-sided influence Myanmar received from India; indeed, what is most fascinating is the reverse movement of culture: various cultural assets, like script, religion (Buddhism), legal tradition and texts, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, *Dharmasastra* came back to India with a new form. As I have shown in this essay, the Khamti community stands very high in this transmission of knowledge from Myanmar. Indeed, other groups from Northeast too carry a rich legacy of co-sharing with the people of India's Northeast. If we continue to neglect the study of the history of our closest neighbour, we will be doing injustice to our own composite culture.

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