Chapter IV

BUDDHIST TRIBES OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

In the present chapter, a brief historical account of the Buddhist tribes of Arunachal Pradesh has been given in order to assess the gradual but profound influence of Buddhist psychology in their individual and collective life.

In India, the native land of Buddhism, today, Buddhist people are found only in a few states. They live mainly in Sikkim, Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh and the neighbouring areas of these states. Bengal had some Hinayana Buddhists, but after the formation of Bangladesh most of them have been coming to Arunachal Pradesh. Buddhism in its original flavour is found now only in this state of India.

As a religion, the present status of Buddhism in India, is put up very nicely by one of its lovers, "Buddhism has endured as a persistent but most curious lotus. Refusing to remain rooted in its native pond, it has spread itself across the world. It is a vagrant lotus with no one place to call its home, for it thinks itself the truth and it knows that truth is not at home in any one place but is the home of all."¹

Different scholars have shown the reason for its spread outside India, Buddhism is very simple as a philosophy and also as a religion. Religious life means the observance
of morality combined with such simple exercises as reading the scriptures only. The books of this religion are occupied mainly with problems relating to the psychological attitude of man. The teaching of the Buddha was essentially practical and so it was accepted as a religion and thus it possesses many qualities which seem to be scientific. It preaches the doctrine of moral law that can remove misery from life and can bring happiness to oneself and to others also. Charity and Chastity are given primary importance. Perfection in all good qualities of wisdom, kindness, vigour, tolerance, charity and meditation, is the ideal of this religion. Because of its emphasis on the rules of monastic life, Buddhism looks to be rigorous, but the teachings of the Buddha are related mostly to the problems of practical life. The Buddha himself renounced the world and he asked his disciples to do so not because of his hatred to worldly life, but out of his kindness to the suffering human beings bound in the circuit of self-performed activities leading to unending misery. After his enlightened discovery of the psychological way of the removal of suffering, he wished that the society of monks should observe discipline and teach the doctrine to ordinary human beings. The monks should naturally have higher aspirations for the higher ideals than those of the common people, and so monkhood is an essential character of Buddhism. It is the ideal shown by Gautama himself to
travel from place to place along with the monks to teach the Truth to the people. To remember here the writing of one of the great scholars, "Buddhism is undoubtedly one of the greatest religions of the world and one may even say that it is religion par excellence in the sense that it is concerned first and foremost with man's spiritual life apart from his social and political life." In the lifetime of the Buddha, the religion spread throughout Bihar to the neighbouring states. With the royal patronage of Asoka, Buddhism acquired new strength and flourished outside India. It was spread to the countries of Ceylon, Burma, Tibet and Bhutan. With the decline of the Gupta dynasty, Buddhism lost its flavour in India, its homeland. One of the causes of its fading is the liberal and universal outlook of the Buddha as to the ritualistic aspect of the religion. The Buddha always neglected the outward practices and consequences of action as his viewpoint of life was essentially psychological. So his followers accepted the prevailing ritualistic practices of the already existing religions mainly those of Hinduism. Charles Eliot wrote, "The faults of Indian religions are mainly tolerance of what does not belong to them and sometimes of what is not only foreign to them but bad in itself." Later on, with the advent of the Mahayanas who are more liberal in religious outlook, Buddhism lost its
independent entity and gradually mingled with the Vaisnavaite cult of Hindu religion. Moreover, like all religions, Buddhism also had to face the external and internal persecutions because of which it almost left its homeland. But outside the country, it flourished in several places of Asia, viz., Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Kampuchea, Vietnam, Korea, China, Japan, Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, etc. Mahayana form of Buddhism dominates the northern part of Asia, viz., China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan, whereas in Thailand, Burma, Ceylon and Kampuchea, the chief form of faith is Hinayana Buddhism or Theravada.

"We have to reckon here with a very interesting fact of history. 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 probably via Bhutan. On the other hand, the Hinayana school, later called the Southern Buddhism, which had originally migrated to Burma from Ceylon, was carried back to India by the Khamtis and the Singphos."  

Arunachal is the easternmost State of India. Arunachal (Aruna = the Sun, and Achala = the hill) as the name indicates, is the hilly region in which the Sun first appears in Indian country. Under British rule, it was called NEFA (North East
Frontier Agency) and from January 1972, Arunachal has become one of the union territories of India. Recently, on February 1987, it has got the recognition of a full-fledged State. This hilly region of nearly 84 thousand square kilometres is inhabited by about 10 lakhs of people, scattered in small villages.\(^{5}\) The area is difficult to cross because of thick forests and hillocks. Inhabitants are mostly tribal of Tibeto-Burman and Siamese-Chinese origin. There are as many as fifty tribes with their different sub-tribes. People live mainly in the lower lands on the river sides. Thus there are five main valleys in Arunachal Pradesh along with the five major rivers, viz., Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap. Kameng is in the westernmost and Lohit Valley lies in the easternmost part of the State. People of Buddhist religion are found in both these two extreme regions.

The Monpas and the Sherdukpen are two main tribes of Mahayana Buddhism living in Kameng district. The place is at the southern foot-hill of the Himalayas to the east of Bhutan and to the north of Darrang district of Assam. The Monpas are the followers of the Golugpa sect of Tibetan Lamaism.*

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*Buddhism in Tibet has a singular form known as Lamaism. It is a local form of Buddhism originally based on Indian thought, but gradually differing from it. It is a mixture of Buddhism and Tantrism with various Tibetan practices and beliefs. The Tibetans believe that there are evil spirits surrounding human existence and the generous deities should be worshipped for the removal of these evils. Along with the worship of these deities, they also worship human beings,
The word 'Monpa' indicates their relation with Tibet, because 'Mon' means 'lowland' and this hilly region of nearly 1400 ft. altitude is comparatively lower than Tibet. It is however, not clear whether these Buddhist people had come from Tibet or some Tibetan monk brought Buddhism to them.

In an account recorded by Dr. L.N. Chakravarty, Deputy Director of Research, Arunachal Pradesh, the Monpas of this region came from Sikkim and Phari. But N. Sarkar, also Asstt. Director of Research, Arunachal, wrote, "Before the advent of Buddhism, the Monpas and the Sherdukpons, who inhabit the Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh, believed in the existence of numerous spirits around them." In his opinion the Monpas believe that the Lopon Rimpoche, as they call their preacher Padmasambhava, himself visited their areas and left the Lamas as incarnations of deities. Though it is a monastic system of Buddhism here monks are like the priests who with their magical power can drive out the evil spirits. The historical personalities and the patrons of the religion are as well worshipped. According to Tibetan belief somebody called Padmasambhava established their religion with a completely new revelation called Terma which is written in some unknown language and kept in some hidden place. Historical account proves that some Tibetan king married two wives from China and Nepal and by their influence the king established the base of Buddhism in Tibet in the 7th century A.D. There are also many sects of Tibetan Buddhism of which the Golugpa presided over by the Grand Lama, is recognised as the established Church of Tibet. It is also called the yellow Church, as they use yellow colour specially for hats and girdles. They give insistence on the monastic discipline of celibacy and prayer. 'Talai' is the Mongol word for sea and as a metaphorical symbol of profundity, the Tibetan Lama is called Dalai Lama.
signs of his visit at different places. Mr. Sarkar again writes that 'among the different sects of Buddhism, the Golugpa was the last to come.' Though other sects as Nyingmapa and Kargyupa operated for some time, they are not found now-a-days.

The great monastery of Tawang, the district head­quarter of Kameng is said to be established by some one called Mera Lama about four hundred years ago. It is the biggest monastery in India today. It is as big as containing the capacity of housing about five hundred monks at a time. The monastery is the centre of cultural and spiritual life of the Monpas. In the words of Verrier Elwin "This might be described as a combination of an old fashioned Cathedral school and a Basic Education Centre. A large number of boys come to the monastery. Some of them study in the library in an atmosphere of art, religion and learning. They sat on the floor on cushions and decorated mats. The atmosphere is almost that of one of the older European Universities or, as I have said, of a Cathedral School. But there is also the basic side; the boys get training in hygiene, the dignity of manual work and learn fundamental lessons of discipline, obedience and religious faith which remain with them all their lives."7

There are several other small monasteries or gompa as they call it. They believe that the great preacher visited
seven different places and practised meditation there. So each of these places have old gompas containing the signs of his visit. One of these places is Pangchen, on the north-western part of Kameng. A cave believed to be lived by the master is adorned with stone images. There are some marks on the floor which they believe to be the foot-prints of the Master and also of the hoofs of his horse and the holes of his stick. This gompa is known as Taktsang gompa or tiger-temple as they believe that the master was accompanied by a tiger. The Sarong gompa at Jiktsang (Jik = leopard and tsang = place) where the Master was attended by a leopard, possesses the impressions of his hands and back rested on a rock along with the scriptures placed on it. Here, I remember, "It is, in fact, the case that in early Buddhist art the Buddha is represented only "iconically" by his evident traces (dātu), viz., either by a Bodhi tree, by a "Fragrant pavilion", by a "wheel of the Law (dhamma-Cakka), by foot-prints (pada-vañja) or by a reliquary cairn (thupa) and never by a "likeness" (potima)". This place lies to the east of Tawang. There is another place called Baggajang to the south-east of Tawang with the Baggajang monastery in a thinly populated area. The other holy places are Kimne, Bumgan, Bigha and Komefuk. These gompas keep the images of the Buddha and it proves that they are of later time. A small number of monks live in these monasteries. The monks keep with them some prayer books or such small books
of their religion. The gompas can be identified from a distance by the prayer flags hanging around and winding spiritual peace in the minds of the travellers. "This area is the home of the Monpas, a tribe distinguished for its terraced cultivation, its carpet-making and its love of horses, yaks and sheep .... Quiet, gentle, friendly, courteous, industrious, good to animals, good to children, you see in the Monpas the influence of the Compassionate Lord Buddha on the ordinary man. They may have little theology; they have a great deal of religion .... They have a real dignity, they are people who like to do things properly. Precedence, a certain gravity and order, manners, the ceremonial of daily life mean a lot to them." They follow a simple code of life recommended by the Lamas. They are devoutly attached to their religion. Besides the gompas or lamaseries they build some other construction called **mane** and **chorten** as symbol of their devotion to the Buddha. A mane is seen on the road side. It is like a stone wall upon which their religious formula 'Om Mani Pame Hum' is engraved, to drive away the evil spirit. A chorten is a stupa where occasional prayers are conducted by a Lama.

The Sherdukpen are also the same in religious belief and customs with the Monpas. They occupy the Shergaon and Rupa areas which lie to the southern part of Kameng district. They also claim that the grand master visited some places in
their areas. Jambring, Khang Gisih, Flugima, Machulu, Chupit, Jakhung, Pemoloso etc. are such places. Lord Buddha is worshipped in the gompas, but they hold the belief in evil spirit till now.

From the affinity of religious faith and the similarity of appearances, the two tribes of the Monpas and the Sherduk pens are supposed to come from Tibet or Bhutan. According to the observation of J.N. Chowdhury, "Ethnically they form along with the Sherdukpens of Shergaon and Rupa a distinct group, having affinity with the Bhutanees to the west and the tribes across the northern borders."¹⁰

But the Monpas and the Sherdukpens speak different languages. For this Capt. Kennedy observed, "This extraordinary diversity of language in a country where the people live in harmony amongst themselves is an interesting philological puzzle. I believe that Eastern Bhutan is a polyglot country and it may be that each of the above mentioned languages is sprung from a prototype in Bhutan."¹¹

The other two Buddhist tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are the Khamtis and the Singphos, who live in the east and south-east part of the State. Lohit district of Arunachal is to the east of Assam and Tirap lies to the south of Lohit and Upper Assam. This mountainous region is along the Burma border of India. But the inhabitants of this area generally
live near the rivers. From the account of Dr. Elwin, "The Khamtis immigrated from the Shan States of Burma, towards the end of the eighteenth century; they were followed soon afterwards by the Singphos, a branch of the Kachins of Upper Burma, who lived formerly near the source of the Irrawaddy. Both tribes were at first warlike and aggressive; they combined to attack the Sadiya outpost in 1839. Today, they are peaceful cultivators and enterprising traders. . . . .

Buddhism retains its hold on the Khamptis, but the religion of the Singphos has been considerably modified by a belief in witchcraft and sorcery, and by the importation of local gods into its pantheon." Though the Khamtis and the Singphos are the two main Buddhist tribes in this region, there are some other Buddhist people also. Some Tangsas, living in close proximity to these tribes have accepted Buddhism gladly. The Chakmas are also followers of this religion. Of course, the form of Buddhism, practised in this region of Arunachal Pradesh is not the same as that of the Monpas and Sherdukpens. These people here follow the Burmese type of Hinayana Buddhism or Theravada.* They call the preacher or monk as Bhante. As

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*The Burmese type of Buddhism bears similarity with the Sinhalese Buddhism, though in upper Burma, Chinese influence is also evident. The Burmese people are very religious minded. Every morning and evening they praise Lord Buddha and 'Dhamma'. Every boy round the age of fifteen spends some time in the monastery. The time, however, depends upon one's will from one week to four months at a stretch in a year. The Burman thinks it to be a very pious action to
found in the different accounts given by the English scholars of British Government, both the Khamtis and the Singphos are taken to be of Mangoloid origin. Dalton described them as 
"they are of rather darker complexion than the other Shans, and of coarser features; the Mangoloid peculiarities being more strongly developed in them than their reputed brethren."\(^{13}\)

Another account of their appearance as given by John Michell is as follows: "In appearance they are of a slightly more Mongolian type than the pure Shans, being considerably darker and coarser featured. They are clean, well built, powerful men."\(^{14}\)

Gurdon, again, wrote, "The Khamtis that I have seen looked strong and robust. They had faces of the usual Chinese type, with high-cheek-bones and small peculiarly shaped eyes, and with scanty beard. They did not appear as dark as the Ahoms, and they certainly looked cleaner and neater."\(^{15}\)

All these accounts, however, were written nearly one hundred years ago. Later on, in constant living in the plains and considerable admixture of blood with the plains people had

build a monastery or at least a Pagoda. There are thousands of monasteries in Burma maintained by public donations and helped by national fund. The monasteries serve as schools also. Lessons on reading, writing and counting, i.e., primary education as well as religious and moral teaching is imparted here by the monks. The monks are esteemed by the common people as superior personalities. But when a monk is found to be involved in misconduct, he is driven away by the public.
marked effect in the softening and improving of their features. These descriptions, however, as based on individual limited experience, cannot give the full picture of these people.

Basically, there is no specific difference of features of the Ahoms with the Khamtis and the Singphos. The minor distinctions are caused mainly by climatic conditions. They have some differences of habit also. Some of the Singphos are habituated in taking opium and alcohol. This habit is related with their belief in spirits. They call the spirit nat. After accepting Buddhism, they have given up these habits to some extent. But even now they believe in some spirits. Their old habit of taking meat of wild animals has been made restricted by the influence of Buddhism. These facts show that the Singphos were converted to Buddhism in a later period by the contact of the Khamtis living in close proximity with them. The Singphos are divided in many sub-tribes.

Tirap is recently divided as Tirap district and Changlang district. The Tangsa Buddhists are found in some villages of Changlang such as Kharsang, old Changpu, Khaisang, Mamphai, Kovin etc. The Chakmas living in Lohit are also Theravadins. Some Buddhist people of these races are living in the neighbouring areas of Assam also.

The Khamtis are more sophisticated than most of the other tribes. Perhaps they are of the same origin with the
Tais of Thailand and the Ahoms of Assam. Their script of Khamti language is derived from Tai language and their appearance also exhibits similar looks with some Assamese people, specially the Ahoms. Some of them even possess the Ahom title Gohain. During the reign of Ahom king, their chief enjoyed the status of Sadiya Khowa Gohain.

In the opinion of Gait, "The Khamtis, Phakiyals, Aitoniyas, Turungs and Khamjangs are all Shan Tribes who have at different times moved along the same route from the cradle of their race but the Ahoms were the only ones who did so before the conversion of its inhabitants to Buddhism. The other San tribes are all Buddhists, which shows that they migrated at a later date."16
REFERENCES


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9. Verrier Elwin, A Philosophy for NEFA, op.cit., p. 10

10. J.N. Chowdhury, Arunachal Panorama, op.cit., p. 42


