

# A Study on *Poong* (Dance-Drama) of the *Tai-Khamtis*

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## ABSTRACT

The Tai-Khamtis are one of the culturally rich tribes of north-east India. They are Theravada Buddhist tribe professing their faith after Burmese school. Among the performing arts of the Tai-Khamtis, poong (dance-drama) is significant. Their poongs are mainly based on the themes of Jatakas, folk tales, the stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Different incarnations of Buddha appear key figure in their plays. Now-a day plays on social issues with mimic characters gaining its popularity in the society. The poong of the Khamtis resembles with Assamese bhaona and Burmese (Myanmarese) zats. Tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Tai-Khamtis bear the traits of South-East Asian culture. The study of the Khamti poong is significant for proper understanding of India's cultural relations with South-East Asian countries.

**Key words:** Poong, Tai-Khamtis, Theravada, South-East Asia.

## INTRODUCTION

The Tai-Khamtis are one of the enterprising tribes of northeast India. In the state of Arunachal Pradesh, they are the largest *Theravada* Buddhist tribe concentrated in Namsai and Changlang district. As per the Census Report of 2011, their population is estimated to 12,653.<sup>1</sup> In the state of Assam, they are one of the microscopic minority tribes living in six villages in the district of Lakhimpur. At present, their population in Assam is around one thousand. They belong to the Shan stock of the Tai race. They are originally immigrant from northern Burma. In religion, they are the staunch follower of the

Theravada form of Buddhism. The life and culture of the Khamtis is significant in the socio-cultural history of the region. The resistance they offered to the colonial regime mark them out of special attention in the administrative history of the region.

*Poong* (dance-drama) is an important performing art of the Khamtis. In Khamtis language, *khaipoong* means 'to tell a story' and '*pya poong*' is the term refers to the 'dramatization of a story'. Both *poong* and *pya poong* are commonly used by the Khamtis to denote dramatization of a story. The word '*keincha*' is used as an alternative word for *poong*. The *keincha* also refers to the book which contains drama. In fact, the Khamtis drama which they call '*poong*' is not a drama in real sense of term; it is not of any specific form of theatrical performance either. It is a genre of its own charm with the combination of many forms that is ballet, opera, stage-play and farce-all rolled in one.<sup>2</sup> The '*poong*' is a kind of melodrama in narrative songs with dances interspersed to the accompaniment of orchestral music and farce thrown in and lasting for hours, even whole night show.

## Objectives of the study

- To trace the origin and development of *poong* among the Tai-Khamtis
- To explore the role of monastery(*kyong*) in the socio-cultural life of the Tai-Khamtis
- To examine the significance of *poong* in the society
- To study the influence of neighbouring tribes in the cultural life of the Tai-Khamtis

- To highlight cultural relations of the Tai-Khamtis with the people of South-East Asia.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials for the study were derived from primary and secondary sources. The information required for the study was obtained from the interviews with the aged persons associated with the performing arts in the society. Personal observation during the course of field study in Narayanpur Bor-Khamti village of Assam and Namsai area of Arunachal Pradesh is utilized in the paper. Secondary data such as books, journals, research articles, dissertations etc are consulted to supplement the qualitative data. The present study has adopted both descriptive and analytical methodologies to achieve the objective of the study.

## DISCUSSION

*Poong* is an art form where amalgamation of both devotion and creative impulse find its expression. *Poong* has been the source of spirituality and earning merit. *Poong* not only caters to the spiritual and emotional needs of the community but has become a medium of entertainment for the people. Prior to the advent of electronic media and cinema, there was only one form of visual entertainment and it was obviously the *poongs*. The dance, songs, the story and spiritual teaching through *poongs* works as catharsis for the people. Mimic and humorous scenes are projected in the *poongs* to entertain the audience. Sometimes, to attract the attention of the audience, words or parenthesis of sentences of different neighbouring ethnic communities such as Assamese, Deori, Miri, Singphos, Nepali etc are used in the *poongs*. An important part of the *poong* is that the author tries his best to reform the society.

*Poong* is a popular means of entertainment to convey the religious messages to the audience. The *poongs* of the Khamtis are based on the stories of *Jatakas*, folk tales, the legendary stories of the epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*,

events in the lives of heroic figures of the sixteen *Mahajanapadas* of ancient India, of great philosopher *Leo-Tse-Yun* and legendary personages, like *Chau M'ho* (Hiuen Tsang) of China and so on. The story of Lord Buddha, *Bodddhisatta*, Buddha's former births, *Indra (Fa-sikiya)*, *Deva (Khun phi)*, *Devi (Nang phi)*, monks, saints and animals are the theme of the *poongs*. Human values are portrayed and appreciated through *poongs*. Although the theme of the *poongs* are mainly based on the 550 birth of Lord Buddha, but his last ten incarnations are chosen as the chief character of the *poongs*. The writer (*Chao mo*) takes the story from any one of the birth and created them into play using his creativity and imaginations. In addition to the tales of the *Jatakas*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* provide mine of sources to the play writers (*Chao-mo*) to compose play of their choice. There are some stories inspired by common life of the people. In general, the story of the *poongs*, shows some sort of initial victory of the evil powers over the good, but finally with the intercession of God, the triumph goes in favour of the good force. The main motto of the Khamti *poong* is to glorify messages of Lord Buddha and his teachings.

*Poong* is a performing art where religious theme is the main element, while other aspects such as dance, music and songs form an integral part. In one play, there can be 20 to 25 characters. A *poong* may consist of 500 to 1000 dialogues (*puk*). *Poongs* are rich in language. Since the language used in it has its bearing poetic verses which covers at least ninety percent of the composition, rest is done in prose which is either drawn from Pali or Sanskrit.<sup>3</sup>

The origin of the *poong* is buried in obscurity. The Khamtis might have brought the tradition at the time of their migration to erstwhile Assam from upper Burma in the second half of 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Burmese monks who came with a mission to rejuvenate Buddhism among the Tai-Buddhist communities of erstwhile Assam were instrumental in popularizing the art

form. Most of the Buddhist monks hailing from Burma did not return to their homeland rather stayed among the Khamtis forever. Among the Monks U Sasana Mahastavir and U Kasi Mahastavir were prominent play writers. One of the remarkable things is the incorporation of *Rasa* (taste, essence) in the Khamti *poongs*. The nine *Rasa* in the Khamti *poongs* includes *singhara* (*metta*), *hasya* (*un-khakho*), *karuna* (*yon-nam*), *rudra* (*to-sa*), *vira* (*teo-mun*), *bhayanak* (*unko-unchong*), *bibhatsa* (*soi/chong*), *adbhuta* (*un-aam*) and *shanta* (*khemsa*).

As already stated, the scripts are based on the last ten incarnation of Buddha in the form of king, poor man, animals etc. There are few *poongs* based on social issues as well. Comedy centric *poongs* (*poong peck-chek*) are based on social issues, have been gaining popularity in the society day by day. The title of the *poong*, in general, is based on the main character of the story is known by the term *Chow Along* in Khamti. The Khamtis *poongs* are rich in language which contains deeper meaning. The dialogues of the *poongs* are written in form of songs largely based on poetic verses. They are known for their poetic and emotional qualities. Its prose versions are mainly drawn from the Pali, Tai and Sanskrit languages. Like the Burmese drama, Buddhist moral precept is the dominant feature of the Khamtis *poong* and concept of *karma* controls the events of the play. The play writer (*Chao mo*) is highly regarded in the society. According to their traditional belief the *Chao mo* receives inborn talent from the Goddess of learning *Saraswati*.

Here mention may be made on the Khamti *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The Khamti *Ramayana* is known as *lik Chao Lamang*. According to a legend, a Buddhist monk named *U-Sam-chung-pi-ma-hai* composed this book at the request of a king *Chao-phapeng-mung-khang*.<sup>4</sup> The *Ramayana* deeply rooted in literary and visual art of South-East Asia. After the sack of the Thai capital Ayutthaya in 1767 CE, dramatization

of *Ramakien*, the Thai version of Indian epic *Ramayana* took place in Burma in a newer form. On the origin of drama in Burma, Maung Htin Aung states that true drama resulted only from the presentation of religious stories i.e. Buddhist *Jataka* stories known as *Nibhatkhin* enacted out by amateurs.<sup>5</sup> The '*Rama play*' based on the theme of *Ramayana* was introduced in Burma through Siam in 18<sup>th</sup> century. They called the '*Rama play*' as *Zat*, a derivative from *Jataka*. The origin of the true drama was in the Buddhist religious pageants and the *Nibhatkhin*, based on Buddha's life and the *Jataka*.<sup>6</sup>

Originated in India, travelled through South-East Asian nations, the *Ramayana* tradition brought back to India by the Tai Buddhist communities of the eastern part of the nation in a refined form. The Khamti *Ramayana* starts and ends with the teachings of Lord Buddha. It is mainly based on the *Sutta Pitaka*. The Khamti *Ramayana* (*lik Chao Lamang*) differs from the original *Ramayana* of *Valmiki*. There is no mention of the name of *Valmiki* in the Khamti *Ramayana*. In Khamti *Ramayana*, Rama is portrayed as the incarnation of Buddha. The Khamti *Ramayana* '*Lik Chao Lamang*' starts with the description of different *avatars*. The name of Rama find place in the story of *Dasaratha Jataka*. Here Rama himself is *Buddhisatta*. *Buddhisatta* is the incarnation of *Vishnu*. The mission of his incarnation is to establish *panchasheel* and *tri-ratna* (*Buddha*, *Dharma*, *Sangha*) in the world. We are told that the Khamti *Ramayana* is influenced by *Kirtibasi Ramayana*. The author of the Khamti *Ramayana* had a fair knowledge of Bangla *Ramayana*. Depiction of the heroic achievements of *Taranikhin*, son of *Vivishana* is the fair example of it.<sup>7</sup>

On the Khamti *Ramayana*, Jayanta Sarkar remarks that in Khamti *Ramayana*, there is no reference to saint *Viswamitra* who took *Rama* to Janakpur for breaking the bow. On the other hand, the story tells that once *Rama* saw *Sita* at Janakpur and fell in love with her. Rama started sending love

letters to Sita with the help of arrow, which he used to throw from Ayodhya to Janakpur. Once king, *Dasaratha* accidentally got such letter. He wanted to test Rama and called him to break the *Hara-Dhanu* in which *Rama* was successful. In another place of *Khamti Ramayana* king *Dasaratha* advice his son to follow Buddha, *Dharma* and *Sangha* and rule the kingdom according to Buddhist norms. Such type of advice to follow Buddha is a specialty of the *Khamti Ramayana*.<sup>8</sup> Personalities as well as places in *Khamti Ramayana* include – *Chao Along* (Sri Rama), *Chao Lakhanang* (Lakshmana), *Chao Tathalatha* (king Dasaratha), *Chao Prampa* (Lord Brahma), *Chao Fra* (Lord Buddha), *Sip ho lanka* (Ravana), *Nang Sita* (Sita Devi), *Pikcha mitra* (Vishamitra), *Chao Chenak* (Janak Raja), *Chao Maha* (Mahadev), *Kulung* (Garunda), *Pat pati* (Parvati), *Pipisana* (Vivishana), *Moung Lanka* (kingdom of Lanka), *Ayuthaya* (Ayudhya), and so on.

The *Khamti Mahabharata* is known as *Lik Chao-Along-Thamma-Puktaram* (story of *Yudhisthir*). It has three volumes. Like the *Ramayana*, in their *Mahabharata*, there is the absence of the name of the original author of the epic, *Vyasdev*. In the *Khamti Mahabharata*, *Yudhisthira* has been described as the incarnation of Lord Buddha. Characters of the *Khamti Mahabharata* include *Chao-Thamma-Puktran* (*Dharmaputra Yudhisthir*), *Chao-fima-sinam* (Vima), *Chao Arjunan* (Arjuna), *Chao Nakulam* (Nakula), *Chao-Siate hom* (Sahadeva), *Siliwa* (Srikrishna), *Nang Kungma tevi* (Kunti Devi), *Nang putuma* (Droupadi), *Chao Triya-chanam* (Duryodhana), *Chao Kanon* (Karna) and many others.

The central character of the *poong* is invariably the incarnation of Buddha except in the stories derived from *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Next to Buddha comes the character of *Pha Sikiya* (Indra), *Khun Phi* (Deva), *Nang Phi* (Devi). In many *poongs* the character of Indra appears prominent when there is a call for help. It cannot be explained as to why this character plays

such an important part in *poong* but he is believed to be the one who helps people in distress and need.<sup>9</sup> The Buddha, prince or princess are the central characters and they are accompanied by range of ordinary people such as peasants, poor man, servant, sage, beggar, businessman, hunter and other lesser characters. Based on Buddhist mythology, *Kingnara* and *Kingnary*, the half-bird half-human creature give a new impetus to the *Khamtis* drama, the origin of which be traced in Burmese-Shan tradition. Female characters are presented by male in the plays. In usual, the first scene presents a conflict in the royal palace. The prince and princess, hero and heroine often retire to forest like an ascetic where they have to face various dangers from the villain, demon, and wild animals and so on. Presence of the supernatural power in the time of distress and need, helping the hero or heroine to subdue the villain is a characteristic of the plays. Although receives initial victories, the villain, ultimately must answer for his or her deeds. The victory of the truth and non-violence, over untruth, virtuous over cruel is the ending note of the plays. The foot works of the hero and heroine, Deva, Devi etc are steady, firm and touches the ground lightly while of the demon, villain are swift, fickle and touché the ground heavily. Showing reverence by kneeling down to Buddha, king, spirit, Hindu deities' which is an essential part of the South-East Asian cultural tradition is prominent in the *poongs*.

Actors and actresses wear costumes of various designs which deem fit to represent the character of the play. The male characters wear multi coloured lungi, tight fitting jacket, sling bag, crown, turban, matted hair, false beard etc while female characters (usually performed by male) wear black coloured *mekhela* (a cloth tightly bound round the chest), long sleeve jackets, scarf, false hair and traditional ornaments appropriate to their characters. Wooden or metallic sword, bow, arrow, axe, javelin, hammer etc are the common weapons for the actors representing various characters in



the play. The Khamtis are expert in making masks. They make masks (*kok na or hang na*) of different gods and goddesses, demons, spirits, animals, birds etc. As far as the masks among the Khamtis are concerned, *hang na chyu* (tiger head mask), *hang na fi-fai* (demon mask), *hang na ling* (monkey head mask), *hang na ho-kai* (cock head mask) etc are prominent. Most of the Khamti masks are robust in character and horror type, made of coloured clothes stretched on bamboo frames. The materials which are used in the masks include bamboo stripes, cane, mud, cow dung, cotton clothes, natural gums etc. The lips are painted red and for the eyes, small round mirrors are used. The artist uses the masks during the performance in the theatre (*pya poong*), pantomimes, mask dance and ceremonies (*pois*).

Orchestra forms an integral part of the dramatic performance. A percussion dominated orchestra accompanies the plays. From beginning to the end of the play, it is played as per the dramatic situation for example entry of the king, *Deva*, *Devi*, demon, triumphal march, battle, lover's union etc. The Khamtis orchestra composed of the *kong-pot* (big drum supported by wooden stand), set of *yamong* (gong) graduated to scale and a set of *pai-seng* (cymbal). The *kong-pot* (big drum) with thundering boom is the centre piece of the orchestra.<sup>10</sup>

The study on the *poong* remains incomplete without monastery. Monastery (*kyong or chong*) plays an important role in the socio-religious life of the Khamtis. It not only caters to the religious and spiritual needs in the society, but also acts as a centre of cultural attainment. The spacious monastery compound in the traditional Khamti villages provides ample facilities for the artists to rehearse their dramas, play music, perform dances etc. Monasteries are the centre of musical instruments. Traditional musical instruments for the plays such as *kong pot*, *kong toi*, *yamong*, *seng*, *kyache* etc and masks are readily available in the monasteries. Monasteries

are the choicest place where *poongs* are staged either in open air or on a raised platform. It is centre for recreation for the village folk. It is a pavilion for the villagers where traditional games and sports are played. Monks and temple boys during the time of leisure engaged in artistic works such as making of masks, ivory works, wooden works, manuscript paintings and so on. The staging of *poongs* are normally held during the religious festivals such as, Buddha Jayanti, poi kathing, poi putwa, poi khamsang, poi leng and any merit making occasions.

## CONCLUSION

It is observed that the Khamtis might have brought their *poongs* from Burma at the time of their immigration, because the Burmese dramas had its origin with spread of Buddhism in the land and mainly were based on the tales of *Jatakas* and *Ramayana*. Many similarities evinced in the *poongs* of the Khamtis with the Burmese *Zat pwe* and *Nibhatkin tableaux* of Thailand. The Buddhist monks hailing from Burma and Thailand were instrumental in popularizing the art form among the Tai-Khamtis. The influence of Assamese *bhaona* in the Khamti *poongs* cannot be overruled. The role of *phuchuri*, (a comic role) which form an essential component of traditional Assamese *bhaona* is noticed in the Khamti *poongs*. In general, a *Brahmin (pungna)* character is projected as a comic figure in the Khamti *poongs*.

*Poong* is significant art forms of the Khamtis. Prior to the advent of electronic media; *poong* is the means of community entertainment among the Khamtis. It is in the *poongs*, where active co-operation of all sections of the society required. *Poongs* bring the people together and strong social solidarity in the society finds its illuminating expression through it. It is not only a means of entertainment and an act of earning merit, but also caters to the spiritual needs to many. *Poong* serves as an important vehicle to disseminate the teachings lord Buddha among the common

mass. People of India have a shared cultural heritage with the people of South-East Asia. A popular means of entertainment mixed with the religious fervour, the study of the Khamti *poong* is significant to have a proper understanding of the rich cultural heritage the Buddhist tribes of north-east India and their relations with the people of South-East Asia.

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