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.\(^1\) 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.\(^2\) 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

1. To trace the origin and development of poong among the Tai-Khamtis
2. To explore the role of monastery(kyong) in the socio-cultural life of the Tai-Khamtis
3. To examine the significance of poong in the society
4. 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, Bodhisattha, Buddha’s former births, Indra (Fa-sikiy), 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. 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 18th 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), bhayanan (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. 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. The ‘Rama play’ based on the theme of Ramayana was introduced in Burma through Siam in 18th 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.

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 Buddha’s son. Buddha’s son is the incarnation of Vishnu. The mission of his incarnation is to establish panchasheela 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 Taranikhen, son of Vivishana is the fair example of it.

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-Dhamu 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.

Personalities as well as places in Khamti Ramayana include – Chao Along (Sri Rama), Chao Lakhanang (Lakshmmana), 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 (Vivashana), 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-Thanma-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. 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.

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 rehears 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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