

# Khamti-Ahom Relations: A Political Study

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Received: May 19, 2018

Accepted: July 09, 2018

## ABSTRACT

*Khamtis are one of the rich tribes of Arunachal Pradesh in terms of their history and culture. They played a significant role in the history and culture of Arunachal Pradesh. Their role in the frontier history of India's extreme north-east frontier region and the resistance they offered to the British marked them out for special attention in the administrative history of the area. The paper provides an outline of the political relations of the Khamtis with the Ahoms in a historical perspective. Historical and analytical methods are utilized in the present study. The study generated data from the primary and secondary sources. Primary data are collected by conducting individual and group interviews during the course of field survey to supplement the published materials. Materials for the study are largely collected from intensive library works. Relevant materials are collected from different sources such as books, journals, research papers, Govt. Gazetteers etc.*

**Keywords:** History, Khamti, Ahom, Arunachal.

## Introduction

The Khamtis are very far in advance of all the north- eastern frontier tribes in knowledge, arts and civilization. (Dalton, E.T, 1872)

They are an intelligent and literary folk and claimed far more civilized than the Assamese. (Shakespeare, L.W, 1904)

Alexander Mackenzie aptly remarks on the Khamtis that 'they may fairly claim a more detailed notice on account of the important part they have played in the frontier history'. (Mackenzie, A., 1884)

The original seat of the Khamtis, like their kinsmen, the Ahoms, was the ancient kingdom of Pong in upper Burma. On the original seat of the Khamtis, G.A. Grierson writes, "The Khamtis were originally a North Shan tribe whose head-quarters appear to have been round Mung Kang (*Mogaung*) in Upper Burma. Mung Kang was the last of the Northern Shan states (commonly called the kingdom of Pong) to maintain a condition of semi-independence, and was finally conquered by the Burmese king Alomphra in the middle of the eighteenth century. After the capture of Mung Kang a number of Khamtis migrated north, and settled in a valley high up the Irrawaddy in latitude 27° and 28° north eastwards of the frontier of Lakhimpur. This country was known to the Assamese as BorKhamti or great Khamti Land." (Grierson, G.A, 1904)

They entered into erstwhile Assam towards the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, following the dismemberment of the kingdom of Pong in the middle of that century and first settled at Tengapani with the permission from the Ahom king Surempha alias RejeswarSingha (1751-1769 A.D.).

On the first settlement of the Khamtis in Arunachal Pradesh, John M'Cosh wrote in 1837 A.D. that 'the Kangtis (Khamtis) are the most civilized of all these mountain tribes; they inhabit that triangular tract of country bounded by the Lohit on one side, by the Dihing on the other, and by the mountainous country belonging to the Mishmis on the third.' (M'Cosh, John, 1837)

At present, the Khamtis are mainly concentrated in Namsai, Changlang and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The Khamtis are also to be found in the Narayanpur circle of Lakhimpur district of Assam.

## Discussion

The Khamtis are the same race as the Ahoms, but differ from the latter in being Buddhists. Of all the Shans, the Khamtis are probably the nearest kinsmen of the Ahoms. (Gohain, U.N, 1942)

When they first entered Assam; they were permitted by the Ahom government to settle on the bank of river Tengapani in the year 1751 A.D. Having settled in Assam, their chief *Burha Raja* Chao-Ngi-lungkeng-kham lived on the river Namchoom or Tengapani while *Deka Raja* Chao-Ai-noy-lungkeng-kham was allowed to live at Sadiya. After the death of Chao-Ai-noy-lungkeng-kham his son Chao-Mungan-lung controlled Sadiya under the suzerainty of the Ahoms till 1793 A.D. The Khamtis were allowed to establish their settlements, cleared the forest and cultivated along the river Tengapani in the present Namsai district Arunachal Pradesh. According to a *chetuie* (the word *chetuie* denotes chronicle in Khamti), the

*Chowkham* village was established in 1147 Tai era, which can be approximately equated with 1785 A.D. This reinforces the probable period of Khamti emigration around the middle of the eighteenth century. (Misra, K.K, 1994)

Initially, the Khamtis were contended with their new settlement. But later on, due to pressure from the neighbouring hostile tribe, the Singphos, they crossed the river Brahmaputra and found a safe abode for themselves in and around Sadiya. The prevailing chaotic situation of the contemporary Ahom rule facilitated their scheme to expand territorial jurisdiction and political power. The reign of the Ahom king Lakshmi Singha (1769-1780A.D.) witnessed the first challenge to the Ahom monarchy organized by a group of disciples of *Moamoria Satra*, who had been long sheathing under the oppression of the government. Starting on a religious pretext, the movement soon assumed great political dimensions and swayed the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, bringing forth dormant elements into action everywhere. The Moamoria rebellion brought about great chaos and confusion in the Ahom kingdom and weakened the hold of the Ahom government on the outlying provinces.

Taking advantage of the weakness of the Ahom government the Khamtis crossed the Brahmaputra and about the year 1794 A.D., during the weak rule of Gourinath Singha (1780-1795 A.D.), they ousted the *Sadiyakhowa Gohain*, the Governor of Sadiya and usurped his title and dignity. (Devi, L., 1992)

The Khamtis made several successful irruptions into Sadiya during the troubled reign of Raja Gourinath Singha. Commenting on the Khamti usurpation of the post of *Sadiyakhowa Gohain*, William Robinson writes, "They at length ejected the reigning chieftain, the *Sadiyakhowa-Gohain*, and the Khamti chief usurping his title and jurisdiction, and reduced his subjects to dependence or slavery. The Assamese finding they could not repel the Khamtis, allowed their chief to retain the title he had assumed, -one of the highest in the kingdom, -and to govern the district of Sadiya on the part of the Assamese government." (Robinson, W., 1841)

In this connection, A.C. Banerjee writes, "The Khamtis, 'the first race in Assam in spirit, intelligence and moral character' had liberated themselves from Ahom control in 1794. Their territory, lying to the south of the Noadihing river merged into the Hukawng valley of upper Burma." (Banerjee, A.C., 1946)

The Khamtis ruled over the Sadiya tract with two chieftains one known as *Burha- raja* and the other as *Deka- raja*. (Bhuyan, S.K., 1932)

Headed by their two chiefs they carved out a small principality around Sadiya. Purnananda Buragohain, the Ahom premier adopted a conciliatory attitude towards the Singphos and Khamtis, who in league with the Moamorias, used to invoke Burmese aid against the Ahom government. Thus, he connived at the usurpation of the office of the *Sadiyakhowa Gohain* by the Chief of the Khamtis in 1795. (Baruah, S.L., 2002)

In fact, the weak government of Gourinath Singha compelled to acquiesce in the usurpation. Emboldened by their previous successes, they further wanted to extend their authority and the still continuing Moamoria rebellion helped them in realizing their ends.

About 1799 AD, in the reign of Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1811 A.D.), the *Burha raja* of the Khamtis came down with a large army and waited with their hostile intentions at an encampment at Nibok on the North bank. (Bhuyan, S.K., 1933)

It is said that, in this battle, the Khamtis were aided by other Shan tribes, such as Naras and Phakials, and also by the Abors, at whose hands they had sometime, previously suffered a defeat, in the course of hostilities arising from the kidnapping, by them, of certain Miris owing allegiance to the Abors. (Gait, E.A., 1962)

Purnananda Buragohain, the prime minister of Kamaleswar Singha sent a large force against the Khamtis which proceeded up to Brahmaputra and arriving at Sadiya attacked the enemies and killed a number of them. The Khamtis headed by their *Burha Raja* combined with the forces of Phakial, Miri, Mishmi, Muluk, Khangkhak and Abor challenged the Ahoms and made furious attacks upon the Ahom army but failed to resist, fled from the battle field. The Ahoms won the battle. (Bhuyan, S.K., 1999)

"In the year 1800 AD (according to Ahom Buranji 1797 A.D.), Swargadeo Kamaleswar Singha sent the 5<sup>th</sup> company (sepoy modeled in the pattern of the British) under *Morangikhowa Gohain*, *Bocha Rajkhowa*, *Na Phukan*, *Upordoyangia Rajkhowa*, *Majudoyangia Rajkhowa*, *Saru Abhayapuria Rajkhowa*, *Pani Abhayapuria Rajkhowa*, *Howbora* etc to put down the Singphos, Khamtis and Moamoria rebels of the east. They encamped at Pachalamukh. Purnananda Buragohain marched to Pachalamukh, dispatched the Ahom army in three directions against the Khamtis, Singphos and Moamoria. In this revolt, the Khamtis were aided by the Naras, Phakials and Abors." (Rajkumar, Sarbananda., 2000)

On the Khamti insurrection of 1797 A.D., the reference of the Ahom *Buranji* by Golap Ch. Boruah merits mention. It states that "In Lakni Kapahinga (i.e. in 1797 A.D. one thousand *Borasiringias* revolted in Sadiya. The Khamti *Burha Raja*, Pani-Naras, Fakials, Miris, Mishmis, Muluks, Tekelia Nagas and Abars joined

with them. They assembled together and speared to death the SadiyakhowaGohain and took away his wives and children. The news reached the Burhagohain and the king. They called in the *Gohains*, the *Phukans*, the *Baruahs*, the *Rajkhowas*, the *Hazarikas*, the *Saikias*, the *Baras* and others and held a council with them. It was decided to send an expedition against the insurgents. Then the *Burhagohain* directed the *DihingiaPhukan*, the *NaosaliaPhukan* and the *NeogPhukan* to proceed against the enemies. They were given a company of sepoy, the *Rajkhowas*, the *Saikia*, the *Baras*, the *Dhanudharias* and the *Hiloidharis*. They took necessary provisions in big and small ships and preceded upstream the river Brahmaputra. Our men arrived in Sadiya and halted there. Then, our army attacked the enemies and killed a great numbers of them. The *Khamti Bura Raja*, the *Naras*, the *Fakials*, the *Miris*, the *Mishimis*, the *Muluks* and the *Abars* made a furious attack but our army remained firm and got a complete victory over the enemies.” (Boruah, GolapChandra, 1981)

The *Khamti Bura Raja* along with a numbers of *Naras*, *Phakials* and *Muluks* was made captive by the Ahom army, with a lot of spoils of the war and the captives, the Ahom army came back to their capital Jorhat. The Ahom King KamaleswarSingha consulting with the premier Purnananda decided to establish the captives instead of killing them. Accordingly, the *Burha Raja* of *Khamti* was kept under guard near the royal camp to the east of the *Dichoi*. The *Khamtis* who were his followers were settled at the *Tokolai* forest to the south of the camp. Those *Khamtis* were attached to the two *Hatimurs*, *Labong* and *Lalim*, forming part of the *Burhagohain's Khel*. (Bhuyan, S.K., 1933)

Orders were passed by the Ahom king to erect *Bapuchangs* (Buddhist monasteries) for the *Nora* monks near the *Simaluguriparghat* (i.e. *Ferryghat*) of the *Dichoi* river. (Devi, L, 1992)

*PaniNaras* were rehabilitated at *Titabar* and others were also established at different places of upper Assam. When the *Khamti Bura Raja* was kept interned at Jorhat, the *Deka raja Chao-ai-noy* went back to *Tengapani* and remained silent for a few years. (Gogoi, L, (compiled), 1989)

After their defeat by the Ahoms, the *Khamtis* seemed to have disappeared from political scenario for a time. The Ahoms failed to retain their hold on Sadiya for long, as it appears that the *Khamti's* after a short interval of subjugation, although not paramount as earlier, regained their position on this area during the subsequent commotions caused by the Burmese invasions of Assam (1816-1824 A.D.). (Devi, L, 1992)

On the *Khamti-Ahom* relations, the impression of M.Martin merit mention. He reported, “On the death of *Gaurinath*, king of Assam, the *BurhaGohain* invited the *Raja* of *Khamti* to an interview, under pretence of treating with him for the succession to the throne of Jorhat; for it must be observed, that the right of all the descendants of *Gadadhar* to the succession is doubtful, as his birth was illegitimate. During the interview the unwary *Raja* was seized and put in confinement, and the Assamese took possession of the greater part of *Khamti*. The nephew of the captive prince, however in 1808 was still able to act on the defensive, and harassed the Assamese with a band of faithful adherents. The *BuraGohain* was then said to be preparing a force in order to reduce the country to entire obedience: but whether or not this force proceeded in the beginning of 1809, or what has been the result, I have not learned.” (Martin, M., 1838)

In the year 1818 AD, the Burmese displaced the *Khamti Sadiya KhawaGohain* and appointed a Governor of their own, who, instead of ruling Sadiya as an independent *Khamti* possession, held it in trust under the Burmese. (Michell, John F., 1883)

In 1837 AD, John M'Cosh reported on the *Khamtis* by stating that *Suddia* was the capital of the *Kangti* (*Khamti*) country, and the Chieftain is known by the name of the *Suddia CowaGohaing*, and claimed descent from the Royal family of Assam. The *Suddia CowaGohaing* is believed to be a firm friend of *Chandra Kanta's*, the *ex-rajah* of Assam; when formerly driven from kingdom, the *Suddia Cowa* had influence enough at the Court of *Ava* to obtain the assistance of the Burmese to restore him to his throne. (M'Cosh, John, 1837)

From the close of the year 1821 AD till their capitulation at Rangpur in March 1825 AD, the Burmese practically ruled Assam. This period was marked by wholesale blood-shed, rapine, plunder and devastation. The *Khamtis* along with the *Singphos*, having identified their interest with the invaders, committed the same atrocities on the Ahom subjects and carried off numerous inhabitants into slavery. In this connection, William Robinson writes, ‘Several of the tribes in the eastern portion of Asam, as the *Khamtis* and *Singphos*, availed themselves of the unsettled state of affairs to harass the Burmese; but their operations were equally directed against the unfortunate native of Asam, numbers of whom were carried off by them as slaves.’ (Robinson, W., 1841)

After their occupation of Jorhat, the capital of the Ahoms, the Burmese released those Buddhist Shans including the *Khamtis* and insisted them to go back to their ancestral home (Shan state of Burma). The *Khamtis* left Jorhat but instead of obeying order of the Burmese, they occupied and settled firmly at Sadiya.

The British, on their occupation of Assam in 1825AD, found the Sadiya tract entirely under Khampti control which was not interfered with by the new conquerors as the Khamptis agreed to maintain a force for the preservation of order.(Shakespear, L.W., 1904)

### Conclusion

As far as the Khamti-Ahom political relations was concerned, the Ahoms treated the Khamti's as their nearest kinsmen and allowed to settle the latter in their kingdom when they were affected by the hostility of the Burmese. Till the end of their rule, the Ahoms acted as a big brother in their relations with the Khamtis. On the other hand, the Khamtis proved unfaithful to their benefactors- the Ahom Government who had given them shelter at the time of their distress. Instead of aiding the Ahom Government during the Moamoria rebellion, the Khamtis exploited the situation and arrogated power to them. The Khamtis resorted to open rebellion against the Ahoms when the latter were encountered with series of problems due to the prolong civil war which lasted for about 36 years from 1769 to 1805 A.D. In this connection, S. L. Boruah writes, 'It was the worst of time for the Ahom king, when the Moamorias in alliance with the Singphos and the Khamtis were invoking the aid of the Burmese, and both the British and the *Barkandazes* began to exploit the situation; the former with a somewhat sophisticated design of initial commercial maneuvers to be followed up by naked aggression and the latter in a barbarous way through plunder and devastation.'(Baruah, S.L., 2002)

The Ahom Government did not take any drastic measures against the Khamti insurgents because both belonged to same stock of the Shan race. The Khamti *Burha Raja* was allowed to stay near Dicho camp and religious freedom was granted to them, even monasteries were constructed for their worship. It was a political blunder on the part of the Khamtis not to assist the Ahom Government at the time of need to suppress the Moamorias. Subsequent history shows, the Khamtis became lonely during the Anglo-Khamti war of 1839 AD. Had the Khamtis rendered their services to the Ahoms during the Moamoria rebellion, they would have able to procure the services the Ahoms in their engagement with the British and the history of Upper Assam would have turned to a different dimension.

The study of the Khamti-Ahom relations reveals that the Ahoms followed a conciliatory policy towards the Khamtis and acted as a big brother, on the other hand the Khamtis proved unfaithful to their benefactors- the Ahom government who had given them shelter at the time of their distress. The Khamtis resorted to open rebellion against the Ahoms when the later were encountered with series of problems due to prolong civil war which lasted for 36 years from 1769 to 1805AD. In dealing with the Ahoms, there was a lack of political wisdom and farsightedness on the part of the Khamtis. However, the Ahom Government exhibited their political sagacity and tenderness in dealing with the Khamtis and other Shan tribes. As the Moamorias started procuring the services of neighbouring hill tribes like the Khamtis, Singphos and Abors, even the Burmese soldier in their war of liberation, the Ahoms thought it prudent that the engagement with the hill tribes like the Khamtis might create a fresh trouble to the peace and security of their kingdom. The incorporation of the Khamti and Mishimi areas would have brought the Ahom state to the Burmese boundary and that might provoke the latter to invade Assam for which the Ahom Government was not prepared at all. Besides, the Ahoms tried to hijack the power of the hill tribes so that the Moamoria could not procure their services to use against them. Therefore, the Ahoms followed restrained and appeasement policy towards the hill tribes including the Khamtis. Their appeasement policy proved prudent both from the point of view of the security of their kingdom and of their regard for their kinsmen.

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