

BUDDHISM IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

EDITORS

**SRISTIDHAR DUTTA
BYOMAKESH TRIPATHY**



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INDUS
PUBLISHING COMPANY

Call No. 294.3095416

Acc. No. 367

Published by
INDUS PUBLISHING COMPANY
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi-110027
Tel.: 25151333, 42133022, 42133622
mail@indusbooks.com
www.indusbooks.com

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ISBN 81-7387-190-6

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Printed at
Chaman Enterprises, New Delhi

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Preface

This book has grown out of a national seminar on 'Buddhism in North-Eastern India and its Socio-Economic Impact', organized jointly by Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi and the Department of History, Arunachal University, in December, 2002 at Arunachal University, Itanagar. Many eminent scholars from various parts of north-east India participated in the seminar and presented their learned papers. A lively discussion took place after each presentation, which helped the learned authors to revise their contributions for the volume.

For the sake of convenience, clarity and depth, the volume has been divided into four parts: (i) General, (ii) History of Buddhism, (iii) Buddhist Art and Architecture, (iv) Buddhism and its Socio-Economic Impact. Part I consists of two papers, which, as the title of the part shows, are of general nature. These papers introduce the subject and discuss the problems and perspectives of studying history of Buddhism in north-east India. Part II discusses the history of Buddhism in various states of north-east India and traces the development of Buddhism among various tribes of the region. Part III, consisting of 7 papers, deals with some aspects of Buddhist art and architecture of the area. Part IV includes research articles, throwing light on various aspects of Buddhist cultural heritage like dances, festivals, traditional arts & crafts and socio-economic impact of Buddhism among some tribes of north-east India.

The work, it is hoped, will prove to be useful for scholars as well as the general public interested in the subject. The work perhaps, for the first time, throws light on various aspects of

Buddhism in the region in a single volume. It contains articles, on both Theravada as well as Mahayana form of Buddhism, as prevalent in some pockets of north-east India, as a living religion and reveals cultural contact of north-east India with Burma (Myanmar) and Tibet (China) in the past. The work is thus of regional as well as national and international importance.

This volume would not have been possible without the help, support and co-operation from various persons, quarters and institutions. The editors are grateful to the ICHR, New Delhi, for providing financial assistance for the seminar. The editors are specially grateful to Shri C.C. Singpho and Shri T.G. Rinpoche, Ministers, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, for gracing the seminar as Chief Guest and Guest of Honour respectively. Prof. T. Mibang, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Rajiv Gandhi University, not only gave academic advice but also material support in organizing the seminar. The learned contributors have also put us under heavy debt by their co-operation, in sparing valuable time and sharing their precious researches which have gone into the making of this volume. Our colleagues in the Department of History, helped in organizing the seminar smoothly. We are thankful to all of them.

SRISTIDHAR DUTTA

BYOMAKESH TRIPATHY

SECTION I
GENERAL

1

Introduction

Sristidhar Dutta & Byomakesh Tripathy

The north-eastern states of eight sisters, currently represented by Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and Sikkim occupy an important niche in the history and culture of India. Like the western frontiers of India, through which India was linked with Western and Central Asia, the eastern frontier touching Tibet, China and South-East Asia has played a crucial role in shaping the history of India. Through these two corners of the Indian sub-continent entered men, materials, and ideas since prehistoric times, and this process gave rise to the infinite varieties of races and cultures, with which India is distinguished today. In the fitness of things the relevance of the region in the context of history, culture and archaeology of Indian sub-continent can hardly be overstated.

The area is the home of a number of ethnic groups residing in the plains as well as on the hills, with distinct socio-cultural-religious identities. Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism, Jainism, Buddhism, Tantricism and tribal religion have been flourishing here throughout the ages. Among the religious culture of north-east India, Buddhism has played an unique role, which is well reflected in nicely decorated Buddhist monasteries, stupas, other Buddhist minor structures, traditional arts and crafts, rituals, festivals and dances. In many pockets of the region, Buddhism is

still a living religion. It is interesting to mention that though Buddhism came to Assam from Gangetic valley sometimes in pre-Christian era, its impact was limited to Assam only. However, during early medieval period, Mahayana Buddhism was brought by Buddhist missionaries from Tibet to Sikkim and northern and western frontier of Arunachal Pradesh. The late medieval period also saw the migration of a number of Buddhist tribes from Burma to the borders of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. It is to be mentioned here that both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist tribes are residing in various parts of the north-east India. Among the Mahayana Buddhist tribes, mention can be made of the Sherpas (Bhotias) of Sikkim, Monpas, Sherdukpens, Nahs, Membas, Khambas and Meyors of Arunachal Pradesh; the Khamtis, Singphos, Tikhak Tangsas of Arunachal Pradesh; the Tai-Phakes, Tai-Khamyang, Tai-Aitone, Tai-Turungs, Dowanias, Singphos, and Khamtis besides few Shans and Mans of Assam; the Chakmas and Mags of Tripura; and a few Chakmas settled in Mizoram and in the district of Tirap and Lohit in Arunachal Pradesh believe in Theravada Buddhism.

The Buddhist remains are also noticed in every nook and corner of north-east India. The state of Sikkim has a number of Buddhist monasteries and stupas of medieval period of which the Rumtek monastery of 17th century is the most notable one. The area of Goalpara, Nilachal hill at Gauhati, Hajo and many other Buddhist sites in the districts of Shivsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and Lakhimpur have yielded Buddhist remains of ancient as well as late medieval period, which consist of monasteries, caves, stupas, sculptural art, etc. During the recent excavation at Bhaitbari in Garo hills in Meghalaya, remains of a Buddhist stupa of early medieval period has come light. The state of Arunachal Pradesh contains dozens of monuments of Mahayana as well as Theravada Buddhism. Among the Buddhist monasteries of the state, the Tawang monastery built sometime in late 17th century is one of the greatest Mahayana monasteries in Asia. The western and northern frontier of Arunachal Pradesh is full of Buddhist monasteries; stupas of various sizes containing beautiful pieces of Buddhist art made of stone, bronze and stucco, besides impressive

mural paintings. The eastern frontier of Arunachal has preserved a number of Theravada Buddhist monasteries in Lohit and Changlang districts. The Chowkham monastery, constructed sometimes in early 19th century, is the biggest monastery of the area. Among the stupas of Arunachal Pradesh mention can be made of the Gorcham stupa near the Indo-Tibetan border in the district of Tawang constructed sometime in 16-17th century AD. The excavation at Vijoyanagar in district Changlang of Arunachal Pradesh near the Indo-Burma border has yielded a Theravada Buddhist stupa of late 18th century. In the state of Manipur a number of Buddhist sculptures have been located recently. All the above Buddhist remains do indicate the fact that Buddhism was quite popular in various pockets of north-east India.

Studies and researches in the field of Buddhism of north-east India—its history, remains, archaeology etc. are still in the infant stage. Though archaeological study of the remains and monuments of the region started in the later part of 19th century, we do not get any picture of Buddhist remains of the area in those writings. However, writings of John Butler, William Robinson, E.T. Dalton, John F. Michael, A. Mackenzie, P.R. Gurdon, T.T. Cooper, J. Errol Gray, and others occasionally refer to Buddhist tribes and some aspects of Buddhism of the area. Sir Edward Gait's pioneering work *The History of Assam* (1905), K.L. Barua's *Early History of Kamarupa* (1933), R.M. Nath's *Background of Assamese Culture* (1948) and B.K. Barua's *A Cultural History of Assam* (1951) also provide some sketchy information on Buddhism of the area. S.C. Goswami's *Hidden Traces of Buddhism in Assam*, published in *Indian Historical Quarterly* (IHQ), vol. III, 1927 and *Asamat Bauddha Dharma* (in Assamese) published by Sadau Assam Ahom Sabha in 1946 provide some information on Buddhism and Buddhist tribes of Assam. After Independence, a number of exploration and excavations undertaken by individuals, State Archaeological Departments and Archaeological Survey of India have unearthed material remains on Buddhism in many parts of north-east India.

Though some glimpses of Buddhism have been found in the writings of modern scholars of the area, some pertinent problems

of Buddhist studies have not yet been undertaken, like the status of such studies in north-east India, Buddhist influence and some of the socio-economic effects of Buddhism in the day-to-day life of various tribes of the region. Besides, documentation of the Buddhist monuments with its art, architecture, iconography, dances, festivals, arts & crafts and rituals as prevalent in the area have not yet been taken into consideration. Taking the above problems on hand, the Department of History, Arunachal University with the financial help of Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), New Delhi, organized a National Seminar on 'Buddhism of North-East India and its Socio-Economic Impact' in December 2002 at Arunachal University, Itanagar.

The present volume is the outcome of the seminar proceedings. Papers incorporated in this volume are uneven in scope, size, approach and methods of reference citation. Scholars have touched on history of Buddhism, art and architecture, Buddhist cultural heritage, socio-religious institutions of various tribes, impact of Buddhism on traditional arts & crafts etc. However, a number of problems concerning Buddhist studies are still left untouched. The present exercise is the first venture in this regard and we hope the book will generate a lot of interest in the Buddhist studies of north-east India in particular and such studies of India in general.

2

Some Observations

C.C. Singpho

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It gives me immense pleasure to be here this morning amidst the galaxy of scholars and hear from them about Buddhism in north-east India. I deem it a privilege to address the august gathering. I am not a scholar on the subject. However, I would like to dwell upon, what I understand about Buddhism.

To me, Buddhism is a religion of internal development, for it breathes the spirit of unbounded generosity and compassion. Buddhism taught us the path of scientific wisdom through which one can attain the highest peace, bliss and freedom by individual effort and personal purity of heart. Morality is the core and essence of Buddhism. Buddhism is such a sublime religion that is appreciated by intellectuals, scientists, philosophers, rationalists and even by great thinkers all over the world. The Buddha says, 'the dharma that I preach can be understood only by those who know how to think and intellectual people who have the intelligence to use their minds clearly and know how to appreciate this dharma as a universal law'. Scientists have discovered so many things over the last 100 years and many of their discoveries have challenged the teaching of some religions. But scientists

could not discover anything which contradicts the teaching of the Buddha. The more they discover about the mysteries of the universe, the nearer they came to the Buddha. H.G. Wells, the world historian, says in one of his books: when we study our holy books we are told that God created this world six thousand years ago; when we study geology, we can understand it has taken billions of years for this earth to cool down and settle before life became possible. Therefore, how can we believe what is written in our holy books?

In the West a new name is given to Buddhism—'religion of freedom and reason'. Since Buddhists do not depend on gods for their salvation but are encouraged to purify and develop their own minds. Buddhism is also described as a 'do it yourself' religion. Obviously Buddhism is a religion for the spiritually mature people. In the West they cannot find these two aspects in any other religion but only in Buddhism. The Buddha wanted to release us from religious slavery by introducing a rational religion for us to practise by giving due credit to our human intelligence and by maintaining our human dignity. With Buddhism we can cultivate our human values without any excommunication, religious law and religious punishments. The Buddha divided the two extremes of life—addicted to pleasure and self-mortification. He chose the middle path—the noble eightfold path of right view, right purpose, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindedness and right absorption of mind.

We do not know clearly when Buddhism came in to north-east India. During the life of Buddha, Buddhism was confined to the Gangetic region. Though his disciples carried out missionary activities throughout the northern part of India, there is no evidence that Buddhism spread beyond Bengal. It was in the third century BC during the reign of Emperor Ashoka, that Buddhism spread beyond India to the present Sri Lanka, Myanmar and South East Asian countries, and that was the landmark in the migration of Buddhism outside India. Ashoka sent 13 (thirteen) Buddhist missionary monks to 13 countries. Sena and Uttara were sent to Myanmar and Thailand. The reign of King Kanishka witnessed migration of Buddhism to Central Asia and to the far-eastern

countries like Japan and Korea. Buddhism reached China and Tibet from Central Asia.

We do not know clearly when Buddhism became popular in the north-east India. However, we know in certain terms that from early historical period, Buddhism was popular in Assam. The accounts of Chinese traveller Fa-Hien mention the popularity of Buddhism in Pragjyotishpur during the reign of Kumar Bhaskar Barman. The Buddhist remains at Goalpara, Nilachal hills near Guwahati and Hajo reveal the popularity of Buddhism in Assam. The states of Tripura and Meghalaya have also various Buddhist remains. Even in Mizoram, a few Buddhist tribes are now living in isolated pockets. The migration of population of Tai origin also contributed to the growth of Buddhism in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

Arunachal Pradesh is fortunate to have Buddhist cultural heritage in plenty. Here Buddhism is a living religion. The migration of Khamtis brought the religion to the eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh. The Singphos and the Tikhak sub-tribes of Tangsa later adopted Buddhism. The remains of a pagoda at Miao and at Vijoynagar in Changlang district and the famous Tawang monastery testify that Buddhism was in practice in this part of the country for centuries.

In Arunachal Pradesh both forms of Buddhism are in practice. The Khamtis, Singphos and the Tikhak sub-tribe of Tangsas living in eastern part of the state profess Theravada Buddhism. The Mompas, Sherdukpens, Membas, Khambas, Meyor and Zakhring believe in Mahayana Buddhism.

The glory of Buddhism is that wherever it prevailed, artistic pagodas, monasteries and beautiful stupas came into existence. The popularity of Buddhism and its impact can be noticed in the socio-cultural heritage, monasteries, stupas, dances, festivals, arts and craft of Buddhist tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. The famous monastery of Tawang, beautiful tangkas and paintings in the gompa and vihara depict the impact of Buddhism. Prior to the advent of modern education the Buddhist monasteries played an important role in imparting knowledge and basic social education.

The monasteries not only taught the spirituality of Buddhism, it also provided total education to become perfect human beings. In fact, the impact of Buddhism can be seen in the textiles, ornaments, architecture and behaviour of the people. Buddhism also contributed to a great extent in maintaining social harmony and peace among all sections of society.

Buddhism is a living force in Arunachal Pradesh and is playing a very important role in the flourishing of Arunachali culture. We hope that the message of Buddha and other principles of Buddhism have more relevance today, when we live in a world full of tensions, miseries, hatred, and the ugly head of communalism rising in various parts of the world including India. Let us try to follow the basic principles of Buddhism like mercy, kindness, non-violence, non-hatred, compassion towards others, which will help us to build a peaceful world.

3

Buddhism in North-East India

Yan Tikhak

Buddhism never reached north-east India either in the days of the Buddha himself or during the reign of Ashoka the Great. It somehow missed the north-east India and went to China, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, Java, Borneo and even to Korea and Japan later on. Therefore, Buddhism in north-east India is not native to the land. But there is an exception to this conclusion. The Sherdukpens and Monpas of Dirang and Tawang areas are Buddhist for more than a thousand years now. They are Karmapas (Sherdukpens) and Gelukpas who were under the monastic control of Tibet and except for them the entire north-east India never had the light of Buddhism as narrated above.

The scenario altered with the advent of Tai-shan in the Kamarupa and establishment of Ahom kingdom. The Tai-shan (Ahoms) were not traditional Buddhists themselves, but other Tai people followed their footprints upto Brahmaputra valley (Brahmaputra river is called Tai-lowah by the Tangsas). The Tai-Khamti people were the first to bring Buddhism into the valley; they settled in the Lakhimpur and Narayanpur area and Buddhism flourished there till the British arrived and drove them away to Sadiya. Next came the Burmese invasion of Assam in the 18th century. They ruled the land altogether for a century. With them came the Buddhist monks, who spread *Dhamma* here and there;

with them also came the Pkake, Shyam and other Buddhist people. When British India invaded Assam at the call of local Ahom rulers, they drove the Burmese away across the Patkai hills, but many people remained in Assam.

Besides them, some Chakmas in Mizoram are Buddhists. The Tangsas of Changlang district, specially the Tikhaks, became Buddhists at Ledo in Long village, on the other side of Buri-Dehing river approximately in the years 1870-80. Then again the Chakma immigrants in the Changlang and Lohit districts added to the Buddhist population of Arunachal Pradesh.

In this way the Saddhamma came into being in north-east India. In Arunachal Pradesh the Tikhaks (Tangsa), Singphos, Khamtis and the Chakmas are Theravada Buddhists while the Khambas, Membas, Monpas and Sherdukpens are the so-called Mahayana Buddhists. The Tikhaks adopted Buddhism due to initiative of late Rev. U. Narinda Mohathera. Some people think that the Singphos and Tikhaks got converted in the same period hundred years ago. The total population may come upto 1,00,000 Buddhists in Arunachal Pradesh. In Assam, there are various tribal groups following Buddhism. But they are all small in number and mostly remains of the Burmese occupation. But if we include Buddhists from Mizoram and Meghalaya, with those of Assam they may come upto 2,00,000 or more. That is the present situation of Buddhism in the north-east of India. So far as their functioning is concerned, we find as follows:

- (a) The Mahayana Buddhists of Arunachal Pradesh are under the monastic administration of Tawang monastery;
- (b) The Sherdukpens of Kameng district were under the Bhutan monastery earlier, but now they have their own administration;
- (c) For the Theravadas there are two *Samghas*—Arunachal Bhikkhu Samgha, established in the year 1986-87 and the Purbanchal Bhikkhu Samgha established in 1971.
- (d) The others of Mizoram, Meghalaya and lower Assam do not seem to have such proper registered organization at the moment.

It is my perception that the Buddhism in north-east India is in the upswing although very slowly. Say, thirty years back there were no activities of Buddhism in this part of the land, but today there are organized *Samghas* and seasonal open festivities are organized around. I hope the *Saddhamma* will get a proper hold in the north-east in the near future as the Ahoms are at the verge of conversion to Buddhism at the moment.

While we dwell on the subject I would like to enlighten the readers on one point—the Mahayana and Hinayana paradigm. The Theravadins do not called themselves Hinayana nor do they ascribe the Mahayana to the other because of the basic ideological difference. The Pali word 'Therav' and Sanskrit word 'Sthiravada', means 'unmoved', which means they have not moved from the original teaching of Buddha i.e. to follow the *Saddhamma's* eight-fold path and trying to attain *arahatship*. On the other hand, followers of Nagarjuna envisage to attain Buddhahood itself. Therefore, this path is called *Buddhasatya*, meaning 'to be Buddha'. That is why, instead of calling them Mahayana and Hinayana, they are to be named *Buddhisatvavadins* and Theravadins.