

A STUDY ON MARRIAGE SYSTEM OF THE TAI-KHAMTIS

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Abstract: *The Tai Khamtis, a Buddhist tribe, professing Theravada form of Buddhism after Burmese school, are one of the culturally rich tribes of north-east India. In the state of Arunachal Pradesh, they are the largest Theravada Buddhist tribe concentrated in Namsai and Changlang district. In the state of Assam, the Khamtis are one of the microscopic minority tribes inhabiting in five villages under Narayanpur Circle of Lakhimpur district. Marriage is one of the important social institutions among the Khamtis. The paper tries to examine the nature, types and customary rules of marriage system of the Tai-Khamtis and its impact in their society. The recognized form of marriage is monogamy. The wife-giver group is considered as a higher and more prestigious lineage group than the wife-taker's group within the society. Widow remarriage is permitted in the society. Dowry system is not in vogue. The Buddhist monk and the priest do not play a part in the customary practices of the marriage. The study reveals the changes in customary practices of the marriage and significant development of tribe exogamy in their society.*

Key Words: *Tai-Khamtis, Theravada, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, marriage.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Each tribes and sub-tribes living in northeast India have their own customs and traditions, which give each a cultural identity distinct from one another. The marriage system of each tribe is such a cultural specific phenomenon that is inevitable for the continuity of the tribe. Marriage is a social union or legal contract between people that create kinship. It is an approved social pattern whereby two or more persons established a family. It is an institution in which interpersonal relationships usually intimate and sexual are acknowledged in a variety of ways, depending on the culture where it is found. Marriage plays an important role in the Tai-Khamtis society. There is no specific equivalent word for marriage among the Khamtis. The male commonly use the word, “*au mee*” or *aaw sao*” and the females use the term “*tang hein*” or “*pain hein*” for the same. Monogamy is the common form of marriage among the Khamtis though polygamy is accepted as a form of marriage with the social sanction behind it. The Khamtis practices three types of marriage: (i) marriage by negotiation or service (*Aaw long sao*), (ii) marriage by elopement (*Thok no ho chai*) and (iii) marriage by kidnapping on capture (*Aan sheio aaw*). Divorce is rare but not unknown in the society. If the relatives from both sides fail to solve the conflict and misunderstanding between the spouses, they go to the traditional village council called *mot-chup* where the learned members of the council give advice to both parties. The girl child does not get property rights of her parents but after marriage, she gets due shares of property in her husband's family. Widow remarriage is prevalent in their society. In the past, widow had to marry to the younger or elder brother of the deceased husband but not to anybody outside the family. The study is to explore traditional practices of marriage systems of the Tai- Khamtis in detail. The paper attempts to draw an outline on different types of marriage, their procedures and impacts in the society. The findings of the study would help to understand, promote and preserve the cultural heritage of the Tai-Khamtis.

1.1. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The medieval *buranjis* (chronicles) of the Ahoms contain the early reference of the Khamtis of northeast India. The *buranjis* are indispensable for study of the political, constitutional and diplomatic history of Assam throwing light on its social, religious and economic history as well as the Ahoms relations with the frontier tribes of Assam including the Tai-Khamtis. However, most of the *buranjis* deals with political aspects and hardly any mention on the social institutions of the Khamtis. Study on various aspects of the Khamti history and culture started from early 19th century. There had been attempt to refer to the Khamtis in 19th and 20th century literature in a piecemeal manner. *Asamar Janajati* edited by Pramod Ch. Bhattachaya offers a descriptive account of the Khamtis stating their origin, migration, settlement pattern, religion, economy, festivals, dances, dresses and ornaments, marriage customs etc in brief. Lila Gogoi's (compiled) *The Tai-Khamtis of North East of India* contains a number of articles referring to various aspects of history, society, economy, culture, religion, political history of the Khamtis. It is a good source book to understand Khamtis in a better perspective. Jayanta Sarkar's work *Society, Culture and Ecological Adaptation among the Three Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh* has presented an ethnographic account depicting life and culture of the Khamtis. The book deals in length on socio-cultural aspects of the Khamtis. Puspadhar Gogoi's *Tai of North-East*

India focuses history and culture of the Tai groups of the region. The book attempts to project the cultural sketch of the Tai groups highlighting various tangible and intangible cultural heritages. The volume deals with history and culture of the Khamtis focusing their birth, marriage and death rituals. *Gazetteer of India, Arunachal Pradesh (Lohit District)*, edited by S. Dutta Choudhury contains an account of the socio-cultural and political life of the tribes inhabited in Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh where the author provides a brief account of the marriage system of the Khamtis. T. Mibang and M. C. Behera's (ed) *Marriage in Tribal Society (cultural dynamics and social realities)* presented a valuable account on the marriage system of the Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD:

The study is limited to customary practices of the marriage system of the Tai-Khamtis. Materials for the study were derived from primary and secondary sources. The sources of information relevant to the study were mostly obtained from personal interviews with the learned and aged persons of the community. For better grasp of the subject, fieldwork was conducted in Namsai area of Arunachal Pradesh. Information gathered during participation in marriage ceremonies proved helpful in understanding the subject in depth. Secondary data in forms of books, research articles, journals, govt. Gazetteer are consulted to supplement the qualitative data. The approach of this research is historical and exploratory in nature. Both descriptive and analytical methods of research are followed to achieve the objectives of the study.

2.1. A brief History of the Tai Khamtis:

The Tai-Khamtis, professing Theravada form of Buddhism after Burmese schools are one of the culturally rich tribes of northeast India. The word Khamti is the composition of two words, i.e. "Kham" and "Ti" means "gold" and "place" respectively. The word *Khamti* denotes a land full of gold. As their original home Mao-loung or Mao-pung in northern Burma was full of precious ores such as silver, iron and gold, the place was known as Khamti and later on the people inhabited in the region also came to be known as the Khamtis. The word *Khamti* also means, "to adhere to or stick to place". The Tai-Khamtis are descendant of the Shan stock of the Tai race. They are the largest *Theravada* Buddhist tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. In Arunachal Pradesh, they are concentrated in Namsai and Changlang district. As per the Census Report of 2001, their total population is estimated to 12, 890.¹ In Assam, they constituted one of the microscopic minority tribes living in six villages namely, Borkhamti (Narayanpur), Sribhuyan, Gosaibari (Pangkha), Borpathar, Deotola and Tipling (Man-noi) under Narayanpur circle of Lakhimpur District. At present, total population of the Tai-Khamtis of Assam is around one thousand.

2.2. DISCUSSION:

Marriage is a cultural process starting from the days of man living in caves to present state of attainment, is a subject of challenging study. Marriage is a medium that create social connection between two different families. It is a stage of social assimilation, which could be regarded as the beginning of social evolution. In fact, marriage is a cluster of activities leading to socialization. Marriage is everywhere a set of cultural patterns to sanction parenthood and to provide a stable background for the care and rearing of children. It is in effect, the major cultural mechanism to ensure the continuation of the family and other groupings based on kinship.² Marriage involves the social sanction generally in the form of civil and religious ceremony authorizing two persons of opposite sex to engage in sexual and other consequent and correlated socio-economic relations with one another.³

Marriage plays an important role in the Tai-Khamtis society. There is no specific equivalent word for marriage among the Tai-Khamtis. In general, the word "*tang hein*" (*tang* = build, *hein* = house) may be termed as an equivalent word for marriage. Monogamy is the common form of marriage among the Khamtis though polygamy is accepted as a form of marriage with the social sanction behind it. Over a century ago, E.T. Dalton observed that they were not restricted to one wife.⁴ The number of such cases are restricted to the few riches in the society. Adult marriage is the rule among them. Cross-cousin marriage such as mother's brother's daughter or mother's sister's daughter is preferable, but parallel cousin marriage is strictly prohibited in the society. This type prohibited direct exchange of brides between the two lineages. Like the *Lushais*, the Khamtis consisted of a number of wife-giver (*lungta*) and wife-taker (*khuítow*) groups.⁵ Their kinship terms *Jao* and *Khui* also reflected the existence of wife-giver and wife-taker groups in the society. The wife-giver group is considered as a higher and more prestigious lineage group than the wife-taker's group within the society. The age ranges from 20-30 for boy and 15 to 25 years for girls is considered ideal marriageable age range for marriage. Consent of the girl is given due importance in the marriage settled by the parents.

In the society, formal marriage system is settled through negotiations between the parents of both parties. In general, horoscope (*cheta*) is consulted before the finalization of the negotiation. They believe in the influence of stars on the destiny of men. A horoscope is prepared when a child is born and this is consulted before a marriage negotiation is finalized.⁶ Consanguinity is practiced and matrilineal cousin marriages are allowed, both with the mother's brother's daughter and with the mother's sister's daughter. In other to have a better understanding about their

marriage system, it is necessary to explore and find out about the customary rules and procedures followed during the marriage ceremony.

2.2. Types of marriage and customary practices:

As already stated, the Khamtis practices three types of marriage: (i) marriage by negotiation or service (*aaw long sao*), (ii) marriage by elopement (*thok no ho chai*) and (iii) marriage by kidnapping on capture (*aan sheio aaw*).⁷ At present, marriage by elopement (*thok no ho chai*) is the popular form of marriage in the society.

• Marriage by negotiation (*aaw long sao*)

The traditional way of getting marriage through negotiations is a matter of long process. After selecting a girl of their choice, the groom's parents assign a negotiator called *Chow-pachaw* (matchmaker/ go-between) for the marriage negotiation. Every Tai- Khamtis village has some public workers who cater to socio-religious needs of the community. *Chow pachaw* is such an honorary public worker who performs various socio-religious activities of the society. He is the person who knows various customs and rituals of the community, a man of intelligent, sober, and eloquent with a keen sense of humour. After getting an assignment from the groom's parents, the matchmaker, *Chow pachaw* finds a person to assist him. On an auspicious day, the negotiator with his assistant visits the bride's house taking along "*ho-phak*" or "*ho-pha*" (a kind of token – some amount of sugar neatly packed by two leaves of *Alpinia galanga* wild and tied around by seven pieces of white thread), *pan mokya* (platter with stand containing fresh flower) and one or two rupees. On reaching the bride's house, the *Chow pachaw* places *pan mokya* before heads of the bride's family as a mark of respect and the *ho-phak* contains sugar signifies good omen and sweet relations to mark the occasion. *Chow pachaw* does not convey the message of negotiation of marriage directly rather indirectly says that a family of particular *phan* (clan) wants to take some support or help from your family. The bride's family head then wants to know in details about the family and the particular boys for whom the *Chow pachaw* has come to seek support and help. *Chow pachaw* does not say anything clearly about the particular groom except a brief account of the family concerned. As per the custom, the decision of the bride's parents is not to make known to the *Chow pachaw* at his first visit. The *ho-phak* remains with the bride's family until they reply to the proposal. The bride's family may send a message about the acceptance of the proposal through mediators. If the proposal is not favourable for them, message is sent within expected period. In case, the girl is engaged somewhere else, then she returns the *ho-phak* to the negotiator before the second visit. Parents usually take the consent of the girl before finalizing the proposal. The consent of girl is most essential things; no girl is given in marriage against her will. On another auspicious day, the groom's family will send the *Chow pachaw* again as mediator. For the second time the mediator goes with flowers, ginger, salt and sugar in a leaf packet along with *pan mokya* and takes either one, three, five or seven rupees. Always odd number is given which is considered as good but never nine as it is believed as bad omen, especially for a happy and prosperous married life. The decision of the bride's family is made known to the negotiator in the second visit. If the bride's family express their willingness, with their due consent the mediator offer third *ho-phak* in front of the bride family for finalizing the date of the engagement and marriage, settlement of bride price, reception etc.

During this period, the horoscopes of both the bride and groom are matched and studied carefully. If the combination of both horoscopes shows some unfavourable signs, the marriage negotiation stands cancelled immediately. After getting confirmation from the bride's family, the date for engagement and marriage is fixed on an auspicious day. Earlier, the marriage takes place after one year or more from the date of engagement. Now a days they prefer to settle the marriage early as possible to avoid some unwarranted situation like elopement of girls with someone else. The final engagement ceremony known as "*tan wan khai*" is the most significant custom of the marriage ceremony. Literally *tan* means talk, discussion, *wan* means bowl and *khai* means egg which signify institution is related to fertility, germination and prosperity. There is a popular believe among the Tai-Khamtis that egg bowls or *wan khai* is necessary to inform the celestial bodies like the sun, the moon, the stars and earthly things of this marriage. Prior to the day of *wan khai*, it is the custom of the concerned householders to invite their relatives and friends for the occasion with a pair of betel nut and leaves. *Pong pha* is the first step of the *tan wan khai* ceremony. The bride's party asks for *pha* (token) comprising three items, namely –

- ✓ *Pa heing* (smoked fishes, preferably white and egged fish)
- ✓ *Khaw tom* (cooked sticky Bora rice neatly tied by *Alpinia galanga* wild leaves)
- ✓ *Wan khai* (bowl full of rice with 5 or 7 nos. of eggs)

There is popular belief behind taking and giving these items. There are symbolic items of the things use in these *ho phas*. They believe that fish lays uncountable eggs at a time; similarly, the new couple will be able to procreate in order to increase the numbers of the family in the days to come. As for the custom of giving sticky rice, they believe that the love between the groom and the bride will be everlasting and they will remain together like rice grains, which combine into one sticky mass. Among these *phas* (tokens) *wan khai* is the most important. The procedure of the preparation of *wan-khai* is very interesting. Fully boiled 5 nos. to 7 nos. eggs are placed in the cooked rice along with a small bundle of white thread, few white flowers and an amount of Rs. 42/- (*sam-khann*) which is packed neatly by seven leaves. Sometimes, instead of cooked rice and eggs, they use uncooked rice and eggs

which are kept in a *pan mokya* covered with a piece of white clothes and stitch it in a cone shaped. They also bring a bundle of betel leaves and a bunch of betel nut as a sign of good luck and bounty.

In case, the bride's residence is away from the groom's residence than the grooms family headed by *Chow pachaw* and others have to encamp at the nearby house of the bride's residence to perform the succeeding rituals conveniently. With a *pan mokya* along with a pair of betel nut, some flowers, and a token money, the head of the grooms party seeks due permission from the head of a family of the bride's village to perform the engagement rituals because the entire process requires a long time. The subsidiary family happily extends all possible help to grooms party to perform the rituals in a smooth way. On the fixed date and time, the groom's guardians, their relatives, *Chow pachaw*, some aged members of village, boys and girls proceed to the bride's village along with the gifts. Prior to it, bride's party makes a formal invitation to those persons who will accompany the *Chow pachaw* to the bride house. It is to be noted that in the groom's party that the male visiting the bride's house for the engagement is to be equal to female participants so that they form couples without any single male or female, however the numbers of participants in the engagement is not limited. On the day of the engagement, the groom's party and the bride party do not sit together in the beginning. The groom's party sent the messenger *Chow pachaw* to the bride house for prior rituals. He along with his attendants goes to the bride's house and placed *pan mokya* in front of the assembly of the bride party where the clan members, relatives, dignitaries and friends of the bride's family waiting to receive the message from the groom's family. Placing *pan mokya* before the assembly, the go-between, *Chow Pachaw* will inform the purpose of his visit and at the same time he will ask the guardian about the amount of *thamu thanka/ho-ka* (bride price which they supposed to demand). It is important to note that the Tai-Khamtis seeks and demands bride price (*ho-ka*) which is given to the parents as a token of gratitude for bringing up the girl and it is like a sort of security deposits for the bride's future welfare. The demand, in general, is made in the following manner-⁸

- ✓ (i) *Hong lung* = Rs. 3/- (Three rupees)
- ✓ (ii) *Ha kepp* = Rs. 7/- (Seven rupees)
- ✓ (iii) *Khan-lung* = Rs. 14/- (Fourteen rupees)
- ✓ (iv) *Sam-khaan* = Rs. 42/- (Forty two rupees)
- ✓ (v) *Ha-khaan* = Rs. 70/- (Seventy rupees)
- ✓ (vi) *Choi-lung* = Rs. 140/- (One hundred forty rupees)
- ✓ (vii) *Ha-choi* = Rs. 700/- (Seven hundred rupees)

During the conversation regarding the bride price, they used the terminology *choi, khaan etc* instead of *ngein* (rupee). Along with bride price sometimes, bell metal, cattle are demand from the bride's family. There are four types of bride price, which are demanded from the bride's family. These are-

- ✓ *Hoka lung* – price for bringing up the girls
- ✓ *Ngien pi ngien nong* – token money for the relatives of the bride from father's side.
- ✓ *Ngien nachow pulung* – token money for the relatives of the bride from mother's side
- ✓ *Ngien panangtang son kham* – a token money allotted for the negotiators who assembled in bride's house

In addition to these prices, the friends of bride in the village also demanded a token money from the groom side, which is in their term *ngein pachow-pamaw*. This money is utilized in the welfare works of the village by the youths. Among the rich, the bridge price may go up to include many more things such as bead, necklaces, daos, spears, metal bells, pieces of silk cloth, silk coats besides a numbers of cattle. When the bargaining of the bride price is over and both parties arrive at conclusion, the groom party will come to the bride house and sit together with the bride party. At this moment, the cone shaped tray containing raw rice and eggs will be broken. The ritual is known as *khom wan khai* and it is followed by entertainment by the host. The token money of *ngein panang tang son kham* is disbursed among the participants of the *wan khai* ceremony. The token money of *ngein nachow pulung* and *ngein pi ngien nong* is later on, disbursed solely to the close relatives of the bride. In return, the relatives give precious gifts to the bride on the day of the final marriage. The amount of these two categories of token money vary from clan to clan, if the bride is of higher rank and she belongs to a high family the groom's party have to pay more amount. In common, the amount of *ho ka* (bride price) is demanded one *choi* (Rs. 140/-) or 3 to 5 *choi* equivalent to Rs. 520/- to Rs. 700/- respectively. However, there is no any hard and fast rules' regarding the amount to be realized from the groom side, it depends upon the economic condition, social status and after all understanding between the two families. Date of marriage may or may not be fixed on the day of negotiation (*wan khai*). If not fixed on the same day of *wan khai*, then the date is fixed with mutual consultation with the two families. On the fixed date, the guardians of the groom, relatives, *Chow pachaw*, boys and girls of the village proceed to the bride's home. Usually the groom does not go with the party. On the day of final marriage (*happ sao*), the groom party has to bring many items to the bride's home that are to be carried on *happs* (carriers). Normally, the *Chow pachaw* along with his attendant go with two *happs* namely *happ haeng* (*happ* = carrier, *haeng* = dry) and *happ yam* (*yam* = wet). On one side of the carrier, there is ½ egg and other side contain 50 paise along with 100 to 200 packets of boiled cakes made from the grinded rice

powder neatly packed with *Alpinia galanga* wild leaf, salt and smoked fishes full of eggs. Each packet contains two or three fishes, some salt or sugar, cake, a token money, handkerchief, along with a pair of candle and incense packet. The packets of cake and smoked fishes are to be carried in wickers (*paa*) by the young girls preferably, by sisters of the groom. The numbers of packets as per the demand made during the *tan wan khai* (negotiation) ceremony. The numbers of *happs* (carriers/packets) increase according to the demand of the bride side. These are for the relatives of the bride's family. The first *happ* goes in favour of the bride's house; the second *happ* goes to the maternal uncle while the third and fourth *happs* go to the relatives including father's sister. The fifth *happ* is for the villagers expected to be graced the occasion. Another carrier called *happ yam* contains liquor container, two big fishes, one egg and one rupees in each side. As the party starts their journey, one hits the bell while another person fires the gun. As soon as the groom party reached bride's house, the bride party welcomes them and they are served with delicious foods. *Happ haeng* is offered to the villagers and invitees graced on the occasion as per the instruction of the bride's house. It is mandatory on the part of groom's side to distribute token gifts to all people graced on the occasion. On the day of *wan khai* (negotiation) and *happ sao* (final marriage), community feast are held for the whole day. In general, all the expenditures of the bride's family are borne by the groom's side.

After the end of the reception to the invitees and the groom party, the mediator *Chow pachaw* holding the tray of flower (*pan mokya*) requests the bride's guardian to permit them to take the girl to the groom's house. Then the mediator makes an address to the bride's father in the following manner: "A year has twelve months or three hundred and sixty five days and according to the Buddhist almanac, this day is the most auspicious. If the girl is given in marriage today, by virtue of the day, she will have a good fortune." After attaining the permission, the bride is brought out at an auspicious moment. Prior to it, she offers *kantow* (bow down) to the elders of her own family. The elders, in return, bless her and tie white thread round her wrist and as a token of love offer some valuable gifts in case or in kinds. The elder members and relatives offer blessings and give lessons of moral and social values to the bride, which are essential to maintain social norms in the married life. After completing the *kantow* ritual, she is stepped out of her parents' home in an auspicious moment fixed earlier in consultation with the sacred books. At this moment, two women from groom's family bring her out of her parents' house. At the time of stepping out, her mother will utter her name five times, in return the bride will reply for three times. By doing so, it is believed that the fortune of the house will remain in their home because the Khamtis consider the bride as symbol of fortune. By that time, the girl's friends bring out gifts given by the villagers and other things such as cooking utensils, clothes, gold ornaments, furniture and other things of day-to-day use given by her parents. Very often, the villagers help the bride's family through cash contribution for purchasing these things. The bride is decorated with traditional apparels. In the traditional Khamti society, married woman is known by the dress she wore. Married woman used the lower garment (*sein*) black in color upto the breast. The bride wears a green sash (*langwat*) round her waist crossing down the knee, which is the symbol of a married woman in their society. She covers her head with a white *challeng chaddar* right from the beginning of the journey from her parent's house to the groom's house. Ornaments the bride wears includes bracelet (*wen*), necklace (*poy*), earring (*kenhu*), figure ring (*lap sop*) etc. The Khamtis woman does not put vermilion on her forehead. The arrival of the bride is greeted by gun firing and beating some musical instruments giving high sounds. The procession of taking the bride to her-in-laws is known as *shong sao*. During this journey, bride's elder brother armed with gun, sword, javelin, shield, lighting implements etc., relatives and friends accompany her upto the groom's house. During her journey to the groom's house, her relatives and friends will stop her at least three times.⁹ The custom of stooping the bride on her way is called *tann sao*. As soon as she reaches at the gate of her parents, she is stopped, second at mid way and third time when they are about to enter the groom's boundary. At such stops, the groom's party through *Chow pachaw* pays in case and in kinds according to the demand of the bride party. The women folk take leading part in this process. Those who do not go up to the groom's village put the obstacle and demands money batch by batch and the negotiator gives the amount after bargaining with them. When the bride's procession reaches the groom's village, the party does not enter the house rather they wait outside the boundary. The custom of receiving the bride's procession by the groom's family is known as *happ na phapta*. As soon as the bride enters the boundary of the groom's house, they are received with dignity with a *pan mokya* and a token money of *sam-khann* (Rs. 42/-) as a mark of respect. In the groom's home, the bride have to cross an artificial gate erected at the bottom of staircase or on the threshold with two small banana tree and citronella plants round which several rounds of white thread are put. Beside the gate, a bucket full of rice is kept on the right side of the staircase while another bucket full of water having gold or silver coin or other precious metal in it. At the last stair, one stone and an iron axe are kept in which the bride have to put her feet before entering the threshold. According to a Tai Khamti legend, a Khamti youth had married a dragon in form of human. To detect such a deception banana and citronella plants are erected in the ladder of the house. The seven white threads are tied to restrict the evil spirit from entering the house which may accompanied by the bride.¹⁰ The customs of keeping rice, gold, coins etc, they believe that the bride would bring prosperity to the house. In an auspicious moment, the bride is brought and a priest after praying for a happy conjugal life reads a sacred book known as *lik kemson or lik aao khein sao*, which teaches the bride of her new duties and

responsibilities to be performed in the married life. After reading out the sacred book, the bride is advised to go through the thread and break it, then pick up some rice from the bucket and takeout whatever she finds in dipping the bucket full of water. While stepping into the staircase, the bride is advised to steps her left foot on the stone and iron axe on the right foot. It signifies the enduring tie that binds her with her husband. After crossing the last stair, she is to be accompanied by the groom's mother, who leads her to the apartment arranged for her. Throughout this function, a group of girls' remains round the bride and all along one of them holds an umbrella on the bride's head. It is to be noted that in every steps of the marriage, such as day of inviting people, day of negotiation (*wan khai*), time of stepping out of the bride from her parents home, time of entry of the bride in groom's house, the Khamtis follow the astrological instruction minutely. The groom party then offers gifts to the bride's close relatives and the other present in the party batch after batch. Finally, an honorarium is given to the go-between (*Chow pachaw*) by the couple in accordance to the customary rules. At the end of the ritual, all are entertained in a grand feast. They are treated with fine rice, curry and various food items. At this moment, the boys and girls start joking. They often say that if the groom feed the bride, then only they can start taking meal. The groom gives a little amount of food to the bride and in return, the bride feed him. Then boys and girls start taking their meal. After the meal, the bride's party bade goodbye and the marriage ceremony ends. The marriage ceremony practically ended with the custom of *pap-phateen* i.e. the return of the newly married couple to the bride's residence. After seven days or sometimes delayed for waiting for an auspicious day, the bride along with the groom go back to her parents' residence to have blessing from the elders. The couple bows down with a *pan mokya* and gifts before the bride's parents, uncles, elder brothers etc. asking blessing from them. The couples also receive gifts from their relatives. The couples have to pay visit to the bride's relatives one after another. The newly married couples have to pay respect to groom's kith and kin in similar manner, which they have done in case of the bride's family.

✓ **Marriage by elopement** (*Thok no ho chai*):

One of the very common forms of marriage among the Tai Khamtis is marriage by elopement. When the boy and the girl fall in love with each other but parents do not agree to their marriage, then they elope and subsequently marriage takes place. Customs that followed in the marriage by elopement are almost same as that for the negotiated marriage. As soon as the bride is brought to groom's house, the groom's parents engage a negotiator (*Chow pachaw*) immediately and send him with *ho-phak* or *ho-pha* (token money of one *choi* = Rs.140 and some amount of sugar) and *pan mokya* to the bride's parents to inform about incident of their daughter's elopement with their boy. This particular *ho-phak* is known as *phak palak* (*phak*=token, *palak* = thieving). Another *ho-phak* known as *thop sheay* is placed before the bride's parent for preventing any kind of violence from the bride's family. If the *ho-phak* is accepted then the groom side sends another token for praying well being of the girl's family as they had brought the bride without informing any supernatural power. Finally, they send another token requesting the date for the final rituals. After mutual consultation, both parties decide an auspicious date for ritual of *tan wan khai*. On that day, the bride and groom along with negotiator, guardians and relatives visit the bride house for rituals. The *wankhai* ritual is performed in similar manner as it is performed in case of the marriage by negotiation (*aao long sao*). As per the customary rule, the girl (bride) cannot visit her parents' house until and unless the ritual of *wankhai* is performed.

✓ **Marriage by kidnapping** (*Aau sheio aaw*)

In the marriage form *aau sheio aaw*, the boy forcibly taken away the girl without her consent and approval from parents. The procedures of the rituals of this type of marriage are same as in case of the marriage by elopement. Sometimes the rituals of *wan khai* take many days to conclude specially regarding the bride price to be given by the groom side. Normally, the groom side has to pay heavy price for their offence of taking the girls without her consent and her family. The recognized system of marriage among Tai-Khamtis is monogamy. The marriage by a man of two sisters concurrently is not forbidden but in such cases, the second marriage is without any pomp and luxury.¹¹ Their traditional marriage has been clan exogamy and tribe endogamy. In the society, dowry has not prevailed. The groom's family does not demand anything from bride's family. However, necessary articles of day-to-day uses such as utensils, clothes, ornaments, furniture etc are offered to the bride by her parents as far as they could afford. On the day of negotiation, (*wan khai*) relatives and friends offer gifts to the bride. The Khamtis do not celebrate marriage and starts new works during *neo wa* (retreat period) and in the month of *lin kamm* (corresponding to December-January month). Divorce is rare but not unknown in the Tai Khamti society. Due to the conflict between the spouses sometimes, marriage breaks up in the mid way. Conflict between the spouses may arise due to the lack of faith, misunderstanding, adultery, drinking, gambling, impotency, unemployment, unsound mind, economic crisis etc. An indifferent attitude of eight year from either of the spouse for the other is enough for a divorce.¹² If the relatives from both sides fail to solve the conflict and misunderstanding between the spouses, they go to the traditional village council called *mot-chup* where the learned members in the council give advice to both parties. They are made to understand the well and woe of the married life and advised them to reconcile. If the conflict is beyond reconciliation in such cases, the *mot-chup* sanctioned the divorced according to the rules in their law book called *lik Thammasat*. If the divorce takes place with mutual consent then the share of property goes equal to both parties. If the husband not by his wife seeks the divorce

then he has to give compensation and half of the property to the aggrieved wife. However, if the wife seeks divorce she has to pay some compensation and she does not get the share of property from her husband. According to the decision of the council, the custody of child is given to either to the father or to the mother. If the divorced women decided to marry someone else and if the custody of the child is with her, the property she gets for looking after the child remains with her but if the custody of the child is given to his father, she duly returns the property to her former husband. The girl child of the Tai-Khamtis does not get property rights of her parents but after marriage, she gets due shares of property in her husband's family. Widow remarriage is prevalent in their society. In the past, a widow had to marry to the younger or elder brother of the deceased husband but not to anybody outside the family. Now a day the widow can marry someone outside the family in that case she deprives her property rights over the property of her late husband.

CONCLUSION:

In maintaining the traditional cultural heritage, the Tai Khamtis seemed to be conservative. In performing socio-religious ceremonial rites, the Khamtis shows extraordinary co-operation. Marriage is such a popular social institution that provide platform to cultivate social harmony, goodwill, friendship and solidarity. Mutual co-operation of clan members, relatives and even the villagers during the whole process of marriage is indeed one of the best practices among the Khamtis. The invitees offer monetary contributions to the bride and groom's family either in case or in kinds on the day of final negotiation (*wan khai*) which immensely helps the family in the time of need. The Tai-Khamtis society is patrilineal. The children take the surname of their father. Religious leader and priest do not play any part in the marriage. With the change of time, marriage system or rituals associated with it have also been subject to change in all societies depending on changing environment, cultural pattern, social values, economic condition, perspectives etc. With the progress of science and technology, effects of modern education and globalization some drastic changes have taken place in the traditional systems of the Tai-Khamtis. Some changes have been taking place in the customary practices of marriage system among them in the present scenario. The educated youths do not show much favour to the bride price system, as it puts bar upon the marriageable youths. The younger generations prefer marriage by elopement to marriage by negotiation to escape from huge expenditure of money and wasting of time and resources. The common prescribe form of marriage of one's mother's brother's daughter marriage has become unpopular among the new generation. Tribe exogamy is increasing in the society. Earlier, a boy preferred to marry a girl from higher clan but now days instead of clan, class and economic aspects matters more. However, the evil practice of dowry is not in vogue. Sometimes, the parents of the rich family give their daughter lots of gifts in forms of cash and kinds because of which poor family hesitate to go in for process of negotiate marriage traditionally and favour elopement. Tribe exogamy is growing day by day due to drugs abuses and other socio-economic factors. In their society, the bride side still enjoys higher status. In spite of the influence of other societies in their cultural ethos, the Tai Khamtis have their own distinct cultural life; it is reflected in their various customary rituals and social practices like marriage ceremony. Although, numerically small in number, they are retaining their tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

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