

NARRATIVE ON THE ORIGIN AND MIGRATION OF THE TRIBES OF NORTH EAST WITH REFERENCE TO THE KHARAMS OF MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

The article attempts to examine the origin and migration of the Kharams of Manipur. The Kharams trace their origin to a cave called Khurpui. According to their tradition, there was a tiger at the entrance of the cave, which killed and ate whoever came out of it. One day a man disguising himself as tiger came out of the cave. On seeing him friendly gesture, the tiger remained silent and left the spot. Thus, man emerged out of the cave. It is believed that the said cave is located somewhere near the Makhel, Senapati District, Manipur. After emerged out of the cave, the tradition further relates that they settled on the west of Makhel at Makuilongdi, a big village. From there, they migrated to southwards following the course of the Gowai River and settled at Gokkoklong, Tamenglong District along with other tribes like Kabui, Aimol, Chiru etc. Now, their villages are found inhabiting mainly in Senapati District. The data are based on oral and available literary sources.

Key words: Kharams, Makhel, Khurpui, origin, Gowai.

INTRODUCTION

The Kharam, one of the tribes of Manipur were recognized as scheduled tribe by the Government of India in January 2003(Gazette of India, 2003: 3). During the first half of 19th century, Chandrakriti Singh the then king of Manipur recognized the Kharam tribe by issuing a royal decree. Racially, they are Mongoloid and speak Tibeto-Burman language (Grierson. 2000:447).. The population of this tribe is found inhabiting in Senapati District in four villages namely, *Kharam Pallen, Tampak Kharam, Tuisaphai* and *Laihot Phai*. The total population of the tribe is about three thousands according to 2011 census.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study has adopted an ethno-historical approach; the data are based mainly on field work interviews with knowledgeable persons of the Kharam community and also on the available primary and secondary sources of published works.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

No systematic study on the origin and migration of the Kharams has so far been conducted by any scholar based on the available sources. But, local scholars have mentioned some aspects of the subject matter in their works. However, still await detailed study and treatment within a wide canvas. The term *Kharam* means southerners; (*Kha* means south and *Ram*, southerner). The Kharams believe that during the Stone Age period their ancient forefathers lived in a cave called *Khurpui* which is identified as *Makhel* (in the Mao-Maram sub-division of the Senapati District of Manipur), on the northeastern side of the present Kharam Pallen village. All the men who went out of the cave never returned (back) to their original home. This triggered fear and the cave men wondered what happened to those who had wandered far. In order to find answers to the questions that is in the minds of all cavemen, they went to see for themselves. At the mouth of the cave they saw a big ferocious tiger on the prowl. They realized that all the men who had gone out of the cave had been killed by the tiger. One of them disguised himself as a tiger and came out. On seeing the man, the tiger attacked him to kill but the man signaled him to wait. Then he spoke to the tiger that both of them have similar skin color and design. For that reason the caveman asked the tiger to make friends for each other as long as the sun and moon exist in the universe. On hearing the appeal of the caveman, the tiger silently left the spot. This brought an end to the fear experienced by the cavemen. On hearing the news, all the people then came out of the cave.

Thus, they came out of the cave and settled in the outside world. At first they did not know to adjust their life in the new environment where there was no order in nature. So they held a conference to discuss the matter. It was attended by all the creatures settled there. After a prolong discussion, they accepted the proposal made by a small bird called *Wa-Chei-Pi*. That there should be darkness and brightness so that people could work when it was light and go to rest when it became dark. According to their tradition, it is believed that the sun and the moon rose alternately as soon as the Kharams accepted the proposal. After that they had got the idea of constructing of a house. They learned it after the careful observation of the intricate design and pattern of a skillful weaving spider.

Regarding the history of migration there are two different versions. The first version goes like this. That the ancestors of the Kharams emerged out of a mythical cave called *Khurpui* in the ancient times. For the cave

they pointed to somewhere in the north east. Then, they moved northwards up to *Makuilongdih Longdai*, a place in the *Koubru Laimaton* range, following the course of the *Barak* River. There they lived prosperously. In course of time the village became over populated. Then, they left *Makuilongdih Longdai* and migrated southwards following the course of *Gowai* River. The Kharams lived for a long time at a place called *Rongtol*. Then, they again migrated to *Chasong*. From this village the Kharams moved further south and searched for a new fertile land and settled at *Yorkhobung*. There they lived with the Kabuis. The Kabuis called it *Nungnang* village. In this area also they lived comfortably. During this time a Kharam man lived in another Kabui village called *Gokoklong*. He was a very rich man belonging to the *Jaiche* clan of the Kharam tribe. His name was *Thangsingul Jaiche*. He wished to perform a feast-of-merit called *Inhong*. For that he made it notice to the public through the village elders. After hearing his willingness to perform the feast-of-merit, the Kabuis had demanded him to slaughter thirty buffaloes for the feast and the same should be followed by any intending merit-seekers in future. *Thangsingul Jaiche* understood their plan that the Kabuis did not want to perform the *Inhong* feasting. So he made another condition that the Kabuis who wish to perform any feast-of-merit should also follow the same procedure. Otherwise the merit-seeker and his descendants will face the consequences (*i.e.* if someone performs the feasting without sacrificing the said thirty buffaloes, the performer's house should collapse and fall over him. Thus *Thangsingul Jaiche* agreed the demand made by the Kabuis and vice-versa. Moreover, the Kabuis wanted to perform a *genna* (collective observation) called *ser*. Then the Kharams residing in the *Nungnang* village refused to observe the *genna*. So they left the places *Yorkhobung* and the *Gokoklong* and searched for a new fertile land. In this time also they followed the same river course (*Gowai* River) towards south. On the way they came across a valley and they settled their happily. They called the valley as *Khodungsei Taakboi*. The Kharams were good hunters. They were very fond of hunting. One day some hunters accidentally found another fertile plain on the *Tuivai* River. They called it *Reiyangjol Reiyangphai*. Thus they used the first valley for settlement areas while the latter for agricultural purposes.

They settled at *Khodungsei Taakboi* for a long time. They lived there very prosperously. While they were living at this village, there were two famous and great men. They were *Raalngam* and *Saneirel/Yoler*. *Raalngam* introduced all the necessary rites and rituals to be performed in one's life starting from birth to death and other rituals. He was famous for his magical power. On the other hand *Saneirel/Yoler* was also the most powerful person. He wanted to show his ability. So he performed a feast-of-merit. During the feasting ceremony he contested with the water deity *Tui*. Moreover he is the only person who pays annual tribute (representing his village) to the neighboring non-tribal king. The Kharams were under the suzerainty of *Wairengpa* (*wai* = non-tribal, *reng* = king and *pa* = man) a non-tribal king. So they paid annual tribute to this non-tribal king.

Saneirel/Yoler died on an unusual event. One day he went to the palace of *Wairengpa* to pay the annual tribute as usual but he was sent back as a corpse in a palanquin.

In course of time, they established different villages based on its distinctive clans. The villages thus established are the *Marem*, the *Makan*, the *Saiphu*, the *Seilon*, the *Rakhou*, the *Keilaam*, the *Lukhrabi Yumpham*, the *Kumbi Phai* or the *Kumbi Bung* etc. Of these clan wise villages, the *Kailaam* village was the most wealthiest and prosperous one. Every year the village performed a festival called *Rein* and all the Kharams residing in different villages including *Khadungsei Taakboi* have the chance to join and meet their friends and relatives. During this festival they have the right to sing all kinds of song but relating to the past deeds. From different royal chronicles it is learnt that once upon a time the Kharams were frequently invaded by the Moirang kings. Of them mention may be made of *Phang Phang Atengpa*, *Yiwang Puriklai Tushempa*, *Chothe Thangwai Pakhangba*, *Yiwang Puriklai Thiyang Michouba*, *Sangton Leinoutaba/Kharam Lanthaba*, *Shonglen Lanthaba* (1054 – 1083), *Chingkhru Telheiba* (1083-1138), *Yoiremba* (1263 – 1313), *Sana Hongpa* (1381 – 1432), *Nungnangton*, *Nungnang Telheiba* (1743–1767) etc.

Moreover, they were also attacked by the Meitei kings. Some of the Meitei kings who conquered the Kharam villages are: *Meidingngoo Lam Kiyamba /Chingkhong Lemgaingamba* (1515-1523), *Keinou Chalamba* (1545 - 1562), *Khunjaoba* (1652-1666), *Paikhomba* (1666 - 1697), *Charairongba* (1697-1709) and *Khokkhei Lonyanba* (1697-1713) (Bhogeshwor, 1988: 99-100). After the death of *Nungnang Telheiba* (1767), Moirang principality was merged with the Meitei principality. For the Kharams, when they were attacked by the Moirang kings they took shelter at Meitei principality. On the other hand, for the fear of the frequent attack by the Meitei kings they fled to Moirang and took shelter there. In the year 1789, during the reign of king *Chingthangkomba*, a general survey for the specification of the Kharam tribe, was made under the supervision of *Thiya-Keirungba* (Cheitharol Kumbaba, 1989: 154). After getting this survey report, 35 (thirty-five) Kharams were made to settle at *Waikok* in 1790. In the same year, a Kharam *Khullakpa* was also brought from Moirang. Another survey was made (1790) under the leadership of *Wangkheirakpa*. In 1864, the Kharams were rehabilitated by the then king *Chandrakriti*. He also freed them from any kind of bondage. For that the king made all the necessary payments (per head) and issued a royal proclamation on a copper plate. Now this copper plate is housed in the Manipur State Museum, Imphal (Sangkham, 2006: 369-70).

It is difficult to understand to which of the Kharam villages cited above, remain as the present day Kharams. It is clear that once they were under the suzerainty of the Moirang and the Meitei kings. But the names of the villages under the Moirang and the Meitei kings do not appear similar except in the case of the *Kharam*

Tushuk which was jointly defeated by both the kings of Moirang and Meitei. At first they settled at *Waikok* under the protection of the Meitei kings. Then they were transferred to different villages like the *Kharam Lampak* (present *Khuman Lampak* area), the *Lalambung Ichouhoubi*, the *Namteng (Lamdeng)*, the *Langol etc.* on different grounds.

There is a long history how they have come to *Kharam Lampak*. Before they were specified by the then king *Chingthangkhomba*, they lived along with other tribes like the Aimol, the Chiru, the Chothe, the Kabuis etc, in the *Tuivai* valley. There was a conflict between the Kharams and Chothes. It was started only when a Kharam man killed a Chothe. It was happened when a Kharam man caught the Chothe in the process of stealing the fishes already trapped by the former. Thus, the enmity started between them. The Chothes liked to revenge the Kharams. In course of time one Chothe lady got married to a Meitei king. The Chothes took the chance to revenge. They asked the Meitei king to help them. The Meitei king helped the Chothes to revenge the Kharams. To help the Chothes for the first time the king ordered the Chothes and Kharams to build a circular dyke for keeping elephants at Imphal. He also did command the Kharams to build the circular dyke with their bare hands, from inside while the Chothes were allowed to construct the same dyke from outside the circle but with weapons. At last the Kharams were encircled by that dyke and the Chothes took the chance. They attacked the Kharams. The Kharams managed to snatch the weapons from the Chothes and wiped them out. They controlled the situation and performed what they wished. Thus the Kharams now claim that the present *Khwairamband Keithel* is an appellation of the *Kharamband* (Dyke of the Kharams) and the *Khuman Lampak* is also named after the Kharam habitation area. It can be proved only when the archaeological evidences are available.

When the mission to help the Chothes was failed, the king for the second time decided to destroy the Kharams. So an order was passed to settle the Kharams at a very unsuitable place for human habitation. It is another form of punishment for the Kharams. They lived there for some time and managed to overcome the natural hardships. There some of them became rich and prosperous. They were so much wealthy that they can compete with the wealth of the then king except the number of horses and elephants. So they often held festivals. It made very noisy and disturbs the atmosphere of the palace of the Meitei king. Thus circumstances compelled them to shift from that site (*Khuman Lampak*). Then they were shifted to the *Lalambung Ichouhoubi*. There also the same problem arose. So they shifted their village to the *Lamteng* and established a new village there. From there they again migrated to the *Tera Pheitak* (near the present *Lansonbi* village) first then to the present *Kharam pallen* village. There is also a story how they reached and settled at *Kharam Pallen*. There are two versions again about story of migration to this present village.

While they were living at *Tera Pheitek* they were prosperous. They reared many domesticated animals. One day, a mother pig of a Kharam widow gave birth to her giggling at an area belonging to the present *Kharam Pallen*. According to the Kharam beliefs, it was a good omen for them. They considered that site was good for human habitation. Thus they shifted (their village) from *Tera Pheitek* to this site. In course of time there was a strong man called *Khanglapa*. Though he was the son of a widow, he is known for his strength and fastness. Due to his qualities the then Meitei king always accompanied him during the Burmese (*Awa*) expedition. The name of the king is not exactly known to them. But some of them pointed their fingers to king *Gambhir Singh* (during the seven year's devastation). Thus *Khanglapa* drove the Burmese army upto the *Chindwin/Ningthi* River. He killed the hostile force with his bare hand. He used to twist their neck and pulled off their heads. At last he brought the decapitated head of the enemy commander as a trophy to the king. The king was so much pleased with his act and awarded him some paddy field in the plain area lying between the villages of *Maklang* and *Khumbong*. This area is still known as *Singtharon Loukon*. Along with this cultivable land thirty buffaloes were also presented (to use) for ploughing the gifted paddy fields. Hence *Khanglapa* came down to that plain along with some families (hardly thirty families) and settled there. But they did not lived there for a long time. Most of them preferred to return to their original village. At first they feel afraid of expressing their will. So they convened a meeting and resolved to approach the king with a plan. According to their plan/decision they started killing the gifted buffaloes one after another and left only one animal. Then they approached the king and complained that most of the animals had died and they had no means to till/plough the fields. They also requested him to permit/allow them to return to their old hill village. The king accepted their request and permitted them to settle in their parent village as usual. Therefore, they abandoned the new plain village and returned to the original one.

In contrast to the first version the Kharams of the *Tera Pheitek* migrated to the present *Kharam Pallen* village directly at the time when *Khanglapa* was fully grown and helped the then Meitei king in many ways during the *Awa* expedition. The king was so much satisfied with his service and awarded him a hill tract for settlement purposes first. The hill area was the present Kharam area so they migrated from the *Tera Pheitek* to this place. Then the king allotted a cultivable land to the *Kharam Pallen* villagers along with thirty buffaloes also for the services rendered by their strong man *Khanglapa*. Thus thirty families came down to the land newly assigned to them and stay there after some time they wanted to return to *Kharam Pallen* again. They have made a plan and killed all the 29 buffaloes one after another. They lodged complain to the king that their animals had died one after another and without that animals they had no means to cultivate their land. Thus they sought (for an alternative means) permission for rehabilitation at the *Kharam Pallen*. The king heard it and accepted their demand. In this way, they returned to the present village.

Another theory suggests that the Kharams came from two regions: Southeast Asia and south west China. According to Gangmumei Kamei, as the Kharams are Tibeto-Burman, they must have lived with other groups of the same family in south West China before 1000 B.C and migrated to eastern Tibet, Upper Burma, then moved into Irrawaddy valley, Malaysia and Indonesia, and they returned southward and entered north East India through Manipur river, and some tracts of Indo-Burma border to their present habitat, Manipur (Kamei, 2004:13).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, since there is no written record, the origin and migration of the Kharams are based on the oral tradition of the people. They trace their origin from a cave near *Makhel* in the north district of Manipur. After coming out of the cave they settled at *Makuilongdih* and then migrated to the south and settled in different villages. Now they are found mainly in Senapati District of Manipur.

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