

Buddhist Vihara as Institution of the Tai Communities: A Study of Assam, India

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Abstract

Vihara generally means a Buddhist temple or Buddhist monastery for Buddhist renunciates. The concept is ancient and in early Pali texts, it meant any arrangement of space or facilities for dwellers. The term evolved into an architectural concept wherein it refers to quarters for monks or vikkhus with an open shared space in Buddhism. The Tai communities of Assam have also their own organization for the practice of their religion, Buddhism. They maintain a systematic infrastructure so far as their religious beliefs and practices are concerned. This organization is called vihara or kyong in the Tai language. It is also called bapuchang in Assamese used by them. In other words, viharas are central to every Buddhist community as far as the practice of their faith is concerned. It is a place for religious, cultural, spiritual and educational development of the Buddhist communities. The paper aims at focusing on the significance of Buddhist viharas, specially about the viharas of Assam, India.

Introduction:

Being an ethical religion, Buddhism made significant contributions to the formation of a monastic order. The Tai communities of Assam have also their own organization or monastic order for the practice of their religion, Buddhism. They maintain a systematic infrastructure so far as their religious beliefs and practices are concerned. This organization is called vihara or kyong in the Tai language. It is also called bapuchang in Assamese used by them. In other words, viharas are central to every Buddhist community as far as the practice of their faith is concerned. Viharas served as monasteries housing monks for spiritual learning and meditation. These can also be regarded as spiritual practice centers as well as residences for Buddhist monks. In early medieval era, viharas became important institutions and a part of Buddhist Universities with thousands of students.

Viharas in Assam:

Every village of the Tai Buddhist people in Assam has at least one monastery or vihara. Thus we have found as many as forty one viharas founded in the Tai villages of seven districts of upper Assam where these people are found. Districtwise distribution of these viharas may be listed as below,

Lakhimpur District:

Barkhamti Buddha Vihara at Narayanpur, established in 1838.

Sribhuyan Buddha Vihara at the village of Sribhuyan, established in 1840.
Goshaibari Buddha Vihara at the village of Goshaibari, established in 1850.
Barpathar Buddha Vihara at the Barpathar village, established in 1850.

Dibrugarh District:

Namphake Buddha Vihara at the Namphake village, established in 1850.
Tipam Phake Buddha Vihara at the village of Tipam Phake, established in 1850.
Longjong Buddha Vihara at Naharkatia, established in 2010.

Tinsukia District:

Barphake Buddha Vihara at Barphake village, established in 1850.
Moung-lang Vihara at Ledo, established in 1850.
Nonglai Buddha Vihara at Nanglai village, established in 1892.
Margherita Buddha Vihara at Margherita, established in 1892.
Man-mo Vihara at the Man-mo village, Margherita, established in 1932.
Long Phake Buddha Vihara at the Long Phake village, Margherita, established in 1935.
Faneng Buddha Vihara at the Faneng village, established in 1951.
Powai Mukh Buddha Vihara at the village of Powai Mukh, established in 1951.
Ninggam Vihara at Ledo, established in 1953.

Sivasagar District:

Chalapathar Buddha Vihara at the village of Chalapathar established in 1869.
Moniting Buddha Vihara at the village of Moniting, established in 1915.
Rohan Shyam gaon Vihara at the village of Rohan Shyam, Sapekhati, established in 1919.
Disangpani Buddha Vihara at Disangpani, established in 1939.
Chola Bongaon Buddha Vihara at Chola Bongaon, established in 1989.

Jorhat District:

Pathargaon Dhammakosha Buddha Vihara at Pathargaon village, established in 1834-35.
Tipomiya Turung gaon Buddha Vihara at Titabor, established in 1840.
Balijan Buddha Vihara, at Balijan established in 1901.
Aryapriya Buddha Vihara at Pohukatiya Turung gaon, established in 1917.
Betbari Buddha Vihara at Betbari, established in 1951.
Na-Shyam gaon Buddha Vihara at Kachukhat, established in 1975.

Golaghat District:

Barhola Buddha Vihara at Barhola, established in 1835.
Sudhamawati Kyong at Dubarani, established in 1835.
Asoka Buddha Vihara at Rengmai Turung gaon, established in 1910.
Rajapukhuri Buddha Vihara at No. 1 Rajapukhuri village, Sarupathar, established in 1935-36.
Subala Kyong at Tengani, established in 1950.

Karbi Anglong District:

Ratana Buddha Vihara at Ahomoni village, Silonijan, established in 1942.

Bargaon Buddha Vihara at the village of Bargaon, established in 1859.

Ashoka Sutangpe Buddha Vihara at Bhitor Kalioni village, established in 1892.

Papurung Buddha Vihara at Balipathar, established in 1901.

Jetovon Vihara at Balipathar, established in 1919.

Chakihola Buddha Vihara at Chakihola, established in 1972.

Woiluvun Theravada Buddhist Monastery at Diphu, established in 1986.

Gandhurung Buddha Vihara at Bansai, Balipathar established in 1999.

Banseng Buddha Vihara at Silonijan, established in 2000.¹

Viharas as Buddhist Institution:

Viharas are normally built on the eastern side of the village, in a place away from the village so that monks can live in a quite and calm atmosphere. Normally built of wood and thatches, a vihara in its art and architectural design is distinct and different from the dwelling houses of the villages. Roofs of the vihara are normally pointed to the sky depicting a Burma style. Viharas are surrounded by different kinds of trees. It is the custom of the people attached to the vihara to plant trees all around a vihara. It is stated by the Buddhist people that as Buddha got enlightenment under a tree, it is their custom to plant trees around the vihara.

The entire complex of the monastery consists of the main temple (vihara) and the dwelling houses of the monk. It was seen that in Assam in the monasteries all the monks reside in a single house attached to the temple. In this context Dalton has stated:

“The temple and priests’ quarters are also of timber and thatched, but the temples are elaborately carved, and great neatness and taste are evinced in the arrangement of the internal fittings.”²

On a high floor within it are placed a number of images of Lord Buddha of different shapes and sizes made of stones and metals like bronze, silver or brass. Images are also made from marble and wood. Some of those images are brought from Burma. Many of these images are the donations made by the laity. The alter where the images are kept is about three to four feet of the height from the level of floor and these are kept facing to the east, as it is believed that Gautama attained enlightenment in this direction.³ Besides, some pictures or scenes from the Jatakas also adorn the inside of the viharas.

Significance of Viharas:

There are many religious books and manuscripts preserved inside the vihara written normally in Pali, Hindi, Sanskrit or Tai language. Thousands of manuscripts are thus preserved in the shelves of the viharas. Such collections of manuscripts or printed books are found in almost all the viharas. It was reported that those books contain Buddha bandana or prayer, sutras or hymns, stories from Jatakas, parts of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, parts of Tripitaka, mangala Sutra or hymns to be recited for well being of the society, panchasila or five precepts, astasila or eight precepts and dasasila or ten precepts about which discussion has been made later. Most of them are donations made the lay devotees at the name of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The manuscripts preserved are carefully covered beautifully designed

clothes in order to protect them from destruction. It was however noted that in spite of such measures of protection, many manuscripts have been lost due to lack of proper and systematic process of preservation. During our field investigation it was found that a large number of such manuscripts or printed books were in the state of decay and destruction. This was more so the viharas located at the in Namphake village of Dibrugarh district, and that of the Barkhamti village of Lakhimpur district.

Previously, the viharas were the only centers of learning for the villagers. Such education imparted in the viharas was religious, and based on the sacred religious texts which included, among others, knowledge of local arts and crafts. But as soon as formal education has been restored in the village, the children began to go to the schools for formal and modern education. It is to be noted that all members of the villages irrespective of caste and sex can enter into the vihara and take part in its religious ceremonies. Even the people of any other religion are also allowed to enter a vihara.

Among the Buddha viharas of Assam, the vihara at the Namphake village in the Dibrugarh district is the most beautiful vihara where some vikkhus from Hukong Valley, Burma, Thailand and China have been residing since the time of its establishment in the year 1850 A. D.⁴ It is at present headed by Sri Jnanapal Vikkhu of Chalapathar in the district of Sivasagar who has been there since 1977. Besides, since the 19th century many Burmese Buddhist monks have visited Northeast India to preach and preserve Theravada Buddhism, and thereby to maintain uniformity in religious traditions and practices with Burma (Myanmar). The Burmese Buddhist monks were aware of the different groups of people of Burmese origin who entered the Brahmaputra Valley in the late 18th and early 19th century. The monks wanted to revive earlier religious connection with these people so that they can maintain their identity through religion. In that case, Buddhist Viharas played an important role. Viharas are dwelling space for monks to live a dedicated monastic life which focused on meditation and spiritual development. These are served as centers for providing Buddhist teachings and preservations of Buddhist texts and traditions.

Conclusion:

Buddhism has provided us with an easy to understand, comprehensible, and widely accepted religion. The influence on humankind of Buddhist teachings was higher on the common people because of their simple emotional elements and simple ethical code. Thus the Buddhist viharas or monasteries, members attached to them-the vikkhus or monks, and their life and practice form the basis of the religious belief and practices of the Tai Buddhist communities of Assam. It has been noted that not only their belief and institutional systems form a distinct order by themselves but also has created an identity for their society. Buddhist systems of Assam, India today therefore deserve proper attention of the social scientists and philosophers.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. These are, as found through field investigation, the viharas existed in the Tai Buddhist villages of Assam. Besides the Tai communities there are other communities in Assam such as Singpho, Man, Tikhak, Chakma, Nepali, Mag or Barua, Lama etc. who profess Buddhism of

both Theravada and Mahayana form. But these are not Tais. They have also some Buddhist viharas which are not included in the present list.

2. E. T. Dalton, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, Calcutta, 1872, p. 6.
3. B. Tripathy and S. Dutta, 'Buddhist Monuments of the Khamtis-A Preliminary Survey' in Proceedings of North East India History Association, 24th Session, Gauhati University, 2003, p. 149.
4. C. V. Nageswara, A Survey of the Theravadi Buddhist Monasteries of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture, Guwahati, 2007, pp. 36-37