

Tai Phake Women of Assam: Quest for Salvation through Theravada Buddhism

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Abstract

The Tai Phakes of Assam is a group of people who belong to the greater Shan Tai or Thai of South-east Asia. Being the followers of Theravada Buddhism, they practice the basic principle of Buddhism including the Four Noble Truth and Eightfold Path. The ultimate goal of every Phake practitioner is to attain salvation (*nibbana*), which can be achieved by earning merit through meritorious deeds following the path of the *Dhamma*. The path to salvation is basically the same for both male and female practitioners in the Phake society. Thus, women are equally capable of achieving salvation like men. The Phake womenfolk engage in the basic practices of charity, moral practices and meditation of the order for achieving the ultimate goal.

Keywords: Theravada Buddhism, Salvation, Tai Phake Community, Tai Phake Women,

Introduction

Various groups of the greater Shan Tai people live in different parts of South East Asia including India. In the context of India, Tai people live in parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, the easternmost states of India. Through the ages, six Tai groups entered this part of present India. The first group was the Tai Ahoms, who entered the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 A.D. and established their power in the valley. They continued their rule for about six hundred years to 1826. Thereafter, five other Tai groups migrated to this part of the country. The Tai Phakes were one of them. Originally, they lived in Yunnan province of China and migrated to the Hukawng valley of northern Myanmar in the early part of the 13th century. Due to the atrocities and oppressive rule of Burmese King Alaungpaya, they left Myanmar for Assam crossing the Patkai Hill in 1775 AD. At present they mainly live in eight villages in the Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts of Assam with a population not exceeding 2000. The Phakes are followers of Theravada Buddhism having a close relation with Burmese lineage. Buddhism has a deep influence on the lifestyle, religious practices, thought, culture, literature and material culture of the Phakes. The women of the community play a crucial role in practising the Buddhist rituals across generations.

Objectives :

The paper relates to the Tai Phake women's participation in religious practices from a Buddhist perspective. As such, following are the basic objectives of the paper ---

1. To study about the traditional role of Phake women in the Phake society
2. To explain the role of the Phake women in household Buddhist rituals
3. To study about their involvement in Buddhist communal rituals and festivals
4. To discuss the existence of a nun-like *yashi* system.

5. To study about basic practices followed by the women and their way of earning merit for salvation

Methodology

The approach of the present study is descriptive and analytical. Data has been collected both from primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include Buddhist texts, colonial records, ethnographic accounts, field study related to the target area etc. The secondary sources consist of relevant research works, books, journals, souvenirs etc.

Position of Tai Phake Women in the Society :

The Phake society is patriarchal where the father is the head of a family. In spite of male dominance, the Phake women generally enjoy a position of considerable freedom in the society. They have a respectable status in the family as well as in the society. The women play an important role in household chores and also in running the family. Their traditional duties in the family circle include childrearing, cooking, weaving, collection of fire wood, planting and harvesting of paddy etc. However, they freely participate in religious and other ceremonial activities held in a household and the monastery. Household rituals like name giving ceremony of a new born baby, puberty etc. are purely performed by women.

Buddhism and Phake Lay Women :

The Buddha opened space for women in his order. From the Buddhist scriptures, it is clear that the Buddha personally showed his respect to women. Preaching to both men and women, he kept places for them in his order. Opening the door for women, he incorporated them into the order in two ways: by placing them as nuns, forming the order of nuns (*Bhikkhuni Sangha*), who renounced the mundane world and led a life of homelessness and by accepting lay women, who could carry on their family affairs. No doubt, this entry into the order greatly enhanced their religious and social importance.

The formation of the order of nuns was a bold step in the religious history of contemporary India. The Buddha established the *Sangha* for women in the fifth year after his enlightenment. On the other hand, he formed the order of the monks (*Bhikkhu Sangha*) after a few months of his enlightenment. In spite of more restrictions imposed on the order of nuns, Buddhism opened a space for women where they got opportunity to practise the *Dhamma* and to participate in the religious activities. On the other hand, Buddhism showed women the path of celestial emancipation by their own effort like men through the practice of generosity (*dāna*), moral practices (*sila*), meditation (*bhāvanā*). This was, no doubt, against the exclusive male supremacy of the day in the religious field in contemporary society. *Nibbāna*, the highest bliss of Buddhism, is possible to both men and women. The Buddha says that a woman with her own effort is capable of attaining sainthood (*arahant*) by following the path of the *Dhamma*. Once Ananda, the closest disciple, asked the Buddha about this –

Are women, Lord, capable of realizing the state of a Stream-Winner (*Sotāpanna*), Once Returner (*Sakadāgāmi*), Never-Returner (*Anāgāmi*) and an *Arahant*, when they have gone forth from home to the homeless state under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Exalted one? (*The Buddha and His Teachings*, p. 112)

The Buddha replied to it that women were capable of becoming an *arahant*. Both men and women could attain this goal in the same way. The Buddha says that escape from suffering (*dukkha*) is possible through the realization of the Four Noble Truths and through the ways prescribed by the Eightfold Path. According to Buddhism, one is responsible for one's own emancipation which depends on one's action

(*kamma*). From the Buddhist point of view, there is no male or female, but only good *kamma* by which better rebirth and salvation is possible. Thus, Buddhism not only opens the path to salvation for women, but also shows the same path for both laywomen and laymen. But it is not that gender differences do not exist in Buddhism.

The ultimate aim of every layman as outlined by Theravada Buddhism is to achieve better rebirth leading to salvation that means getting free from the circle of birth and death. It is obvious that in the Phake society, Buddhism plays a significant role in the day-to-day life of a woman. Although their social position is lower than that of male lay persons in the traditional society, they actively participate in both household and collective celebrations and religious practices.

The Phake women basically follow the same path like laymen in observing the *Dhamma* practices. Through active involvement as lay practitioners in the religious activities, the womenfolk try to earn merit in the hopes of better rebirth in their next life and to achieve the goal of *nibbāna* in future. For earning merit in order to achieve the desired goal, women also practise generosity, moral practices and meditation through the participation in various rituals both household and collective. Most lay practitioners in the Phake society, like the Theravadists of Myanmar and Thailand, hold a belief that negative deeds lead to rebirth as women, while meritorious deeds lead to rebirth as men. So, it is important for a woman to earn a sufficient amount of merit for a better rebirth as a man in future. Thus, the traditional notion is that a male is in a more advantageous position than a female in terms of attaining salvation. Men, unlike women, have the opportunity to practice the teachings of Buddha as monks and novices with monastic robes.

Phake Women with Saffron Robes : *Yāshi* System

It is worth mentioning here that no woman in the Phake society is ordained as a novice or nun. So, there is no place for women to become a nun or novice as the *bhikkhuni* lineage was never established among them. Therefore, they are not allowed to take an active role in religious affairs like men following a celibate life. After the decline of the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* in Theravada lineage, a woman, who wishes to practise celibacy as a nun, has no opportunity to be an ordained follower. Yet a woman can follow a self-disciplined life like a non-formal nun outside the monastic order. Such a woman is known as an *yāshi*, who occupies a position somewhere between that of an ordinary lay woman and a monastic. The nun-like renunciate follows almost the same rules like a novice regarding eating, wearing, celibacy etc. Such a woman even shaves her head, wears saffron or yellow robes and keeps an alms bowl and observes the Eight Precepts continuously as a novice whereas the lay women usually observe only the Five Precepts. She does not eat meals after noon like a novice or monk and does not sleep on a soft bed and uses no jewellery or cosmetics. But she is not formally ordained as a nun. In spite of her monastic robes and shaven head, she usually lives in her own house. One may also live in a monastery if she wishes. She can perform day-to-day household activities if she wants. But, she is not bound by all monastic rules as in the case of the monks or nuns. She usually depends on her family members for livelihood. So, she lives a monastic-like life without formal ordination and without formal monastic obligations. Actually, she is neither a nun nor an ordinary lay woman. The *yāshi* system has similarity with *maechi* of Thailand and *thilashin* of Myanmar.

At present there is only one *yāshi* among the Phake. Pinnya Ranchi, who belongs to the Namphake village, adopted the life of a *yāshi* at the age of 20 and spent some years in monasteries of Burma and London. Though she lives in her own house, she maintains the discipline and regularly exercises the

practices assigned to a *yāshi*. She usually attends congregational religious services held in the monastery together with the monastics and the laity. In spite of her close attachment to the *Dhamma*, she is a member of the mundane world in the true sense of the term as she has attachment with her family members.

Lay Women in Household Buddhist Practices :

Through their household religious practices, the Phake women quest for salvation. The Phakes observe various household Buddhist rituals, where the lay women take active part. The female members of a family like male counterpart can take participation in daily worship of the Buddha by offering flowers, food, burning incense sticks, candle, water etc. and chanting *vandanās* before Buddha image in their household shrine, where they can take refuge in the Triple Gem and also accept themselves the Five Precepts. In the morning *khāo tāng sam* (food offered to the Buddha) given in front of the household altar is prepared by the female members of the family. They can also count beads for meditation in the shrine. On the other hand, in the household rituals like *Māṅkāḷā*, *Poi Lu Phrā*, the female members actively participate where they take refuge in the Triple Gem and accept the Five Precepts from the monks. Food and other refreshments arranged on the occasion are prepared and served by the female members.

Phake Lay Women's Practices in a Monastery :

The lay women are also closely associated with community rituals held in their village monastery where they exercise religious practices with the help of the monastic community for earning merit. Of course, merit earning is a fundamental Buddhist practice exercised by both the monks and laymen that means cultivating positive qualities through meritorious deeds, positive thoughts and mental exercises.

Normally, a woman or girl individually or with others may go to the monastery on any day. Then, she may show reverence to the Buddha typically by prostrating herself three times and by offering flowers, fruits, lightening candles and burning incense sticks, before Buddha idols in the shrine. At the same time, she may show her respect for a monk by bowing three times in front of him.

The participation of girls and women in congregational rituals held in the monastery is open. As householders, women, both young and old, married and unmarried equally take part in almost all collective merit-making rituals together with the male community. On a ritual or festive day, the Phake women like men go to the monastery with flowers, candles and incense sticks wearing traditional dresses. They prostrate before Buddha images and also before the monks for three times and then take their seats in the prayer hall for attending the prayer where they take refuge the Triple Gems and Five Precepts from the monks together with lay male devotees. They also chant the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha vandanās* together with others. They also do meritorious works such as listening to *dhamma* discourses, and doing meditation counting beads in the monastery compound for earning merit.

Besides these, women earn merits through various kinds of meritorious deeds. Providing manual service at any ceremony is a meritorious work. No doubt, the preparation of food and of traditional robes for the monastic community is closely associated with the women folk. They cook food for the monks and give it to them in the monastery early in the morning every day. At the same time, a portion of food prepared by the housewife is placed on the household Buddha altar.

On festive occasions, womenfolk prepare and distribute rice cake, tea, food etc. in the monastery among the monks and congregation. In the *Poi Sāṅken* (water splashing festival) held in the mid April of every

year, women spontaneously participate in the festival. They take part in bathing of Buddha idols, of *Dhamma* and of *Sangha*. They also take part in sprinkling water on the *bodhi* tree, *cetiyas* and other holy structures. On the occasion, both young and old, participate in merry making activities among themselves and also with male counterparts. They take part in prayer, religious discourse, meditation and other cultural functions in the monastery campus held on the occasion. On the other hand, the Buddha image of a household shrine is also bathed and cleaned where the female members of a family also take part.

The three months of the rain retreat (*Vassāvāsa*) is important for the Phakes. Like men, women, particularly elderly ones, intensify their religious practices. During this period, men and women go to the monastery on every *uposatha* day (*satang* day) held on the full moon, dark moon and eight days of each lunar fortnight. They participate in the religious prayers, listen to *dhamma* talks and accept the Five Precepts. On the other hand the elderly women like male counterparts accept the Eight Precepts on every *uposatha* day of the rain retreat from the abbot which they make vow to keep for 24 hours. Once it was customary of the Phakes that elderly men and women stayed in the monastery compound on *uposatha* nights for observing the Eight Precepts during the period of the rain retreat. This custom is obsolete in the Phake monasteries except in the Man Mao monastery.

Another important feature is the holding of a prayer (*saung mukkoyā*) by village girls in the monastery during the three months of rains retreat. The village girls come to the monastery every afternoon throughout the period. At present this tradition exists only in the Namphake village. The girls of the village go to the monastery every afternoon wearing traditional dresses with flowers and candles. The girls sing religious songs at the *mandap* (a type of open hall) with flowers in their hands and they also lit candles in front of them while sitting for chanting religious songs. After the end of the chant, a monk or novice of the monastery comes and administers the Five Precepts to the girls. Thereafter, the ritual comes to an end.

Again in monastery orient ceremonies like *Poi Okwā*, *Chā Lee*, *Me Pi* held during the rain retreat, women together with male devotees come to the monastery and take part in religious prayer, accept the Five Precepts and Eight Precepts by elderly women, listen *dhamma* discourses and do meditation. It is customary that the earth goddess, *Vashundhara* (Nang Machuntri), is invoked to witness every meritorious deed held on different rituals at monastery or household. It is worth mentioning here that *Vashundhara* is an important female goddess among the Phakes. Another female deity among the Phake is Water Goddess *Manimekhala*.

Women try to earn merit through their handy works including weaving. In the past, women prepared robes for the monks. A special robe offering ceremony called *Kathina Civara Dāna* ceremony is observed among the Phakes. There is a custom among the Phakes that *kathina civara* is prepared by village womenfolk at the previous night of the ceremony from raw cotton. The whole work of ginning, rolling, spinning, weaving and sewing is done within the night. Some norms are followed before weaving *kathina civara*. The weavers should accept the Eight Precepts from the monks before the preparation of the robe. Widows cannot take part in the process. Though the tradition is not given up, it is almost obsolete among the Phakes as it takes a long process and time. It is also customary that robes for images of Buddha (*Phrā kiting*) of the monastery are woven by the women. Not only robes, other clothes, streamers and flags are prepared by the Phake women. They also weave streamers (*tān khons*) which are used in socio-religious ceremonies to decorate the monastery compound. The streamers are hand woven embroidered long and narrow strips of clothes varied in length and breadth. Small streamers

are hung on the walls of the prayer hall. The weaving of a streamer and donation of it to the monastery is considered as a meritorious act among the Phakes. So, the Phake girls and women generally weave these types of clothes at least once in their life and donate the same to the monastery for earning merit.

In the festivals or rituals like *Maghi Purnima*, *Poi Potesā* etc. women play important roles in various ways. On the occasion of *Maghi Purnima*, women prepared a special kind of mixed pulp food called *khāo yāku*. In *Poi Potesā*, every woman tries to carry or touch *potesā* (*kalpataru*) which is considered as a meritorious work. On the occasion of *Poi Leng* (a ceremonial burning of the mortal remains of a departed monk and its rituals), they play a role by participating in the procession and pulling the chariot that consists of the body of a deceased monk.

The Phake women actively participate in cultural activities held on various occasions in the monastery. They take part in dances including *Kā kong* (drum dance), *Kā pān* (welcome dance), *Kā song* (umbrella dance) and *Kā feefāi* (diamond dance). For both the monks and laity, the rituals, thus, are the ways for questing salvation. Gaining a personal spiritual benefit through collective efforts is, therefore, an important part of the Phake's devotional and ritualistic practices.

There are other activities by which a woman can earn merit. When a person is ordained as a novice or a monk, the merit derived from it is transferred to the parents. When a family gives *dāna* to a monk or the monastery, the merit produced by it goes to all donor members. Thus, the lay women earn merits doing various pious works including pilgrimage.

Although women take part in almost all collective rituals, some restrictions are imposed on them. For example, widows are not allowed to take part in a few auspicious rituals including *kathina civara* weaving process. Boys get the opportunity to learn traditional education in the monastery which is not for girls. Another important thing is that the male laity generally sits in the front rows and the female next to them in a community prayer held in the monastery. The lay leader (*chā lee*), who is a bridge between the monks and laity in religious matters, is always from the male community.

Phake Women and Monastic Community

A lay woman can go to the monastery and visit the monks on any day. But, the Buddhist texts outline some restrictions in keeping the monks' contact with lay women, which is stricter to a young girl or unmarried woman than an elderly married one. The monks should also keep a distance in maintaining a relationship with a lay woman and should not touch a woman or even an object that is held by a woman. Theoretically, the prohibition on touching a woman extends to the kith and kin of the monks. Kondinya writes –

The prohibition on touching a woman extends to the monk's mother. Should she fall in a ditch, if others are present to help her he must not go to her assistance; if others are not present, he may offer her his robe or a stick (but not his hand), and he must think to himself that he is only pulling a long piece of wood." (*Monastic Buddhism among the Khamtis of Arunachal*, p. 83)

The monastic rules also put a restriction on him in speaking with a woman privately without the presence of a third person. He should not even sit next to a woman or sleep under the same roof. It is forbidden for a woman to enter the residence of the monks, but there is no such restriction in the case of a lay man. During the time of a mass prayer, the monks keep bamboo fans (*bi ho trā*) with stands on the ground to mark a partition between them and the laity in order to keep their eyes away from *upāsaka* and *upāsikās* especially the latter.

Conclusion

Actually, there are some functions which are traditionally assigned only to the male laity and some are to the female laity. In the collective festivals the leading part is always played by the male. Some duties such as the bringing down of Buddha images on the occasion of water splashing festival are exclusive for the male. The females are traditionally assigned the tasks like cooking feast food, weaving holy clothes, and serving refreshment to the congregation on the festive occasions. In the Phake society, they play a considerable role in the religious matters of the community and explicitly display their devotion towards the teachings of the Buddha. However, while women do take part in performing and exercising religious rites and rituals, it is more of a supportive role than an active one.

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