



Fairs and Festivals of Arunachal Pradesh: a Cultural Study with Special Reference to the Tai Khamti Community

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ABSTRACT :

Arunachal Pradesh, located in the easternmost frontier of India, is distinguished by extraordinary ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Fairs and festivals constitute one of the most significant expressions of this diversity, functioning as repositories of indigenous knowledge, belief systems, social organization, and historical memory. The present paper undertakes a comprehensive cultural study of the fairs and festivals of Arunachal Pradesh, with special reference to the Tai Khamti community. While festivals among most tribes of the state are closely linked to agriculture, animistic faith, and nature worship, Tai Khamti festivals are predominantly shaped by Theravada Buddhist philosophy and Tai cultural traditions. Through an extensive review of ethnographic literature, government records, and anthropological studies, this paper analyses the social, religious, economic, and ecological dimensions of festivals in Arunachal Pradesh. Particular emphasis is laid on the Sangken festival and other Buddhist observances of the Tai Khamti community. The study argues that fairs and festivals play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity, reinforcing social cohesion, transmitting moral values, and promoting inter-community harmony in a rapidly changing socio-cultural landscape.

Keywords: *Arunachal Pradesh, fairs and festivals, Tai Khamti, tribal culture, Buddhism, cultural identity*

I. Introduction:

Festivals are among the most vibrant and dynamic manifestations of culture, especially in societies where oral tradition, ritual performance, and collective participation play a central role in social life. In tribal societies, festivals are not merely occasions of celebration; they are integrally connected with cosmology, subsistence patterns, social structure, and moral values. In Arunachal Pradesh, fairs and festivals form the core of cultural expression and community life.



They serve as mechanisms for maintaining continuity between past and present, sacred and secular, human beings and nature.

Arunachal Pradesh is home to more than twenty-six major tribes and over a hundred sub-tribes, each possessing distinct cultural traditions, languages, and religious beliefs. This diversity is vividly reflected in the multiplicity of festivals celebrated across the state. Festivals such as Nyokum, Solung, Dree, Mopin, Reh, Losar, and Sangken mark agricultural cycles, seasonal changes, ancestral worship, and religious observances. Despite regional variations, these festivals share common features such as community participation, ritual offerings, music, dance, feasting, and symbolic performances.

Among the various tribal communities, the Tai Khamti occupy a unique cultural position. Unlike many tribes who follow animistic or syncretic belief systems, the Tai Khamti adhere to Theravada Buddhism and trace their cultural roots to the Tai groups of Southeast Asia. Their festivals, therefore, reflect Buddhist philosophy, monastic traditions, and ethical principles such as compassion, non-violence, and moral purification. This paper seeks to examine the fairs and festivals of Arunachal Pradesh in a broad cultural framework, while offering an in-depth analysis of Tai Khamti festivals as a distinctive cultural tradition within the state.

II. Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

- 1] To examine the cultural, religious, and social significance of fairs and festivals in Arunachal Pradesh.
- 2] To analyze the role of festivals in preserving tribal identity and promoting social cohesion.
- 3] To study in detail the major festivals of the Tai Khamti community and their Buddhist foundations.
- 4] To understand the contemporary relevance of these festivals in the context of cultural change and modernization.

III. Methodology:



The study adopts a **qualitative and descriptive research methodology** based on **secondary data**. Sources include ethnographic monographs, anthropological studies, folklore texts, census reports (Census of India, 2011), and publications of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh and the Anthropological Survey of India. Works by scholars such as Verrier Elwin, K. S. Singh, J. N. Sarkar, and B. K. Barua provide the theoretical and empirical foundation. The data have been analyzed thematically, and demographic tables have been incorporated to contextualize cultural practices within population and literacy patterns.

IV.Result and Discussion: **Demographic Context of Festivals in Arunachal Pradesh**

Understanding the demographic profile of Arunachal Pradesh is essential for analyzing the continued relevance of fairs and festivals. The state is sparsely populated, predominantly rural, and characterized by relatively low literacy levels, particularly among women. In such a context, festivals function as crucial institutions for cultural transmission, collective learning, and social integration.

Table 1: Key Demographic Indicators of Arunachal Pradesh (Census 2011)

| Indicator | Value |
|---------------------------------|--------------|
| Total population | 1,383,727 |
| Population density (per sq. km) | 17 |
| Sex ratio (females/1000 males) | 938 |
| Literacy rate (total) | 65.38% |
| Male literacy | 72.55% |
| Female literacy | 57.70% |

Source: Census of India, 2011

The low population density and dispersed settlement pattern explain why festivals assume heightened importance as occasions for collective gathering and reaffirmation of community ties.



Rural–Urban Distribution and Cultural Continuity

A significant proportion of Arunachal Pradesh’s population resides in rural areas, where traditional customs remain relatively intact.

Table 2: Rural–Urban Population Distribution (Census 2011)

| Area | Percentage |
|-------|------------|
| Rural | 77.06% |
| Urban | 22.94% |

Source: Census of India, 2011

The dominance of rural population indicates that festivals continue to be embedded in agrarian cycles and village-based social life. Rural festivals serve as mechanisms for maintaining oral traditions, ritual knowledge, and indigenous art forms.

Literacy and the Role of Festivals as Informal Education

Literacy levels, especially in rural areas, further highlight the cultural significance of festivals.

Table 3: Literacy Rates in Arunachal Pradesh (Census 2011)

| Region | Total | Male | Female |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Urban | 82.93% | 88.45% | 76.66% |
| Rural | 59.94% | 67.44% | 52.04% |

Source: Census of India, 2011

In rural contexts, festivals function as informal educational spaces where values, history, ritual practices, and social norms are transmitted across generations through participation and observation.

Festivals in Arunachal Pradesh: A Cultural Overview

Most festivals in Arunachal Pradesh are agrarian in nature and are celebrated to ensure prosperity, good harvest, and protection from natural calamities. Festivals such as Nyokum (Nyishi), Solung (Adi), and Dree (Apatani) involve ritual offerings, community feasts, traditional dances, and prayers to deities and spirits. These festivals reinforce collective identity and the moral economy of sharing and cooperation (Singh, 1994).



In addition to tribal festivals, cultural fairs organized by the state government provide platforms for showcasing traditional crafts, costumes, music, and dance. Such fairs play a dual role by preserving heritage and contributing to cultural tourism.

The Tai Khamti Community: Population and Settlement

The Tai Khamti are a relatively small community but possess a strong cultural identity due to spatial concentration and shared religious tradition.

Table 4: Tai Khamti Population and Settlement Pattern (Census 2011)

| Variable | Data |
|----------------------------|-----------------|
| Approximate population | 12,653 |
| Number of villages | About 42 |
| Main area of concentration | Namsai district |

Source: Census of India, 2011; Government of Arunachal Pradesh

The concentration of Tai Khamti population in specific areas facilitates collective celebration of festivals and preservation of cultural traditions.

Namsai District: Demographic Profile

Since Namsai is the cultural center of the Tai Khamti community, its demographic features are significant.

Table 5: Demographic Profile of Namsai District (Census 2011)

| Indicator | Value |
|-----------------------|--------|
| Total population | 95,950 |
| Rural population | 85.15% |
| Urban population | 14.85% |
| Literacy rate (total) | 54.24% |
| Male literacy | 61.07% |
| Female literacy | 47.42% |

Source: Census of India, 2011

The high rural population and low literacy rates underscore the role of festivals and monasteries as institutions of cultural learning and moral instruction.

Sangken: The Principal Festival of the Tai Khamti

Sangken is the most important festival of the Tai Khamti community and marks the Tai New Year. Celebrated in April, Sangken symbolizes purification, renewal, and moral regeneration. The ceremonial bathing of Buddha images and the sprinkling of water among devotees represent cleansing of sins and fostering of goodwill (Elwin, 1964).

The festival involves communal prayers, alms-giving to monks, traditional music, dance, and feasting. Sangken reinforces Buddhist values such as compassion, non-violence, and respect for elders, while also strengthening social cohesion.



Buddhist Festivals and Monastic Life

Apart from Sangken, Tai Khamti celebrate Buddhist festivals such as Buddha Purnima and Kathina. These festivals revolve around monasteries and emphasize meditation, sermons, and ethical discipline. Monastic institutions play a central role in preserving Tai Khamti language, script, and ritual knowledge, thereby ensuring cultural continuity.



Festivals, Identity, and Inter-Community Harmony

Tai Khamti festivals increasingly function as platforms for intercultural interaction. Participation by neighboring communities and state-supported celebrations has transformed these festivals into symbols of pluralism and cultural harmony. In this sense, fairs and festivals contribute to social integration while maintaining distinct cultural identities

V.Conclusion:

The fairs and festivals of Arunachal Pradesh represent living cultural institutions that sustain the social, religious, and moral life of its diverse tribal communities. Rooted in agriculture, ecology, and belief systems, these festivals function not merely as occasions of celebration but as vital mechanisms for preserving cultural identity, transmitting indigenous knowledge, and reinforcing social cohesion. In a state characterized by sparse population, rural predominance, and linguistic diversity, festivals provide rare yet powerful collective spaces where community memory, values, and traditions are reaffirmed.

The Tai Khamti community occupies a distinctive position within this cultural landscape due to its adherence to Theravada Buddhism and its Tai heritage. Festivals such as Sangken and other



Buddhist observances reflect values of moral purification, compassion, non-violence, and communal harmony. These festivals are closely connected with monastic institutions, which act as centers of religious learning and cultural continuity. The demographic data further underline the importance of such festivals as informal educational platforms, particularly in regions with lower literacy levels and limited access to formal cultural institutions.

In contemporary times, fairs and festivals have also assumed broader social and economic significance by promoting inter-community interaction and cultural tourism. While modernization and commercialization pose challenges to traditional practices, these festivals continue to adapt without losing their core cultural meanings. The study concludes that fairs and festivals, especially those of the Tai Khamti community, play a crucial role in safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh and deserve sustained scholarly attention and institutional support for their preservation and transmission to future generations.

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