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The Ancient 'Khen' People of India and Bangladesh: An Anthropological Study

By Zinatun Nes
Begum Rokeya University

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The Ancient 'Khen' People of India and Bangladesh: An Anthropological Study

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I. Origin of the Khen

The Word ÔKhen' itself have many complexive and opposite meaning. In Assamees language ÔKhun' or ÔKhen' are paralal term, it means ÔKing' `Great' `Excellent' etc. We found ÔKhen Kamta' or Khen `Kamteshwar. word in greatbook `Ahomburunjee'. It is most possible that the clarification of this Khen people derived from ÔKhun' or ÔKhen'[1] words. Another source informed that, it originated from ÔKhen'[2]. Acoording to ÔKamrupburunigee'- The first king of Khen dynesty Nildhoj were derived from coch People. His father had Khastriya origin but his mother was a fallen woman. For that reason he called as ÔKhen'[3]. According to ananother source, the Khen or Kanteshwar Nildhoj was a mixed racial identity. ÔKh' for `Khastriya' and Ôn' for Ônati' (fallen woman)[4]. The British Historian Montogomeri Martin has said in his book that, the Khen were feel comfort to introduce themselves as ÔKhastriya' and ÔRajbansi'- although the Rajbansis agreed to absorved the Kings of khen with their community and to use title `Khastriya',but they did not agree to taken common Khen People among their caste. The Rajbansis thinks that,common Khen people were a group of slaves to khen king[5].

The first Khen King Nildhoj stablished the ÔGoddes kamda' or ÔGosany' as a family Goddes and named her ÔKamateshwary'. He upgraded Khen dynesty as a real Hindu-dynesty from lower caste Ôsudra'.[6] The Khen people had bear Ôsudra' identity before Nildhoj becoming as a king. In Assam, they were familier as `kolita'. According to Dr.Hamilton Bucanan`s opinion, the Khens only the people of Kamrup caste. Sociologist and Historiam J A Vas described in his book ÔEastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteer, Rangpur' that the Khen`s occupation was cultivation and household works[7].

At Present time, some Khen people of Rangpur claims that they are originated from king Ballal Sen of Sen dynesty and they received ÔKhen' title from ÔSen'[8]. Almost all Khen people in Bangladesh identifies themselves as ÔRajbansi-Khastriya' instead of ÔKhen' although they do not regrates their Khen identity. They are follows all the rituals, religious activities and beliefs like Rajbansi people.

About the origin of Khen, another opinion was that, once upon a time they were the ÔPre-Ahom'indigenous sub-group.They came to the plain land of Cochbihar-Rangpur territory through Garo hills. Khens also claims that they were the ÔHero' or ÔKhastriya' in ancient time. In 15th Century, Khens were established Kamta state under the leadership of Nildhoj[9]. Dr. B. Chettergee described his book ÔA Cultural History of Bhutan' that, Khen People were inhabited in Khen Province of Bhutan. They have relation with Tibetan cityzens. B. Chetterjee chaimed that, Khens were migrated to Tibet from Bhutan[10]. On the otherside, the British Administrator and Anthropologist Martin said, the Khens were the inhabitant of Tripura hilly-forest area of eastern India[11].They spreated out to this north-west land (Cochbihar-Rangpur) from Tripura region.

Aceording to another Anthropologis Dr. W.W. Hunter, the ÔKhen' and Rajbansis were the same category of People. He classified Khens next to Rajbansis in his book `Statistical Account of Bengal'.Aceording to his ethnic study (in 1872) the number of Khens were in Rangpur 20,013 Dinajpur 2714, Jalpaiguri 2380 and in Cochbihar 1901[12].

We did not found present official statistics on Khens of Bangladesh. But educated people of Kurigram district in Bangladesh claimed to us that, at present (2013) there almost 20 thousand of Khen lives in greater Rangpur and Dinajpur district[13]. Dr. Bucanon Hamilton came to Rangpur region in early part of 19th century. He said, he had seen many many Khen family in this territory but the later part of 19th century, Dr. W.W. Hunter did not seen so many Khens. It means, the

Author: Researcher Feculty of Humanity Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur, Bangladesh. e-mail: nesabn23@gmail.com

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Khens became a small community after 50 years.It causes for taking re-name of their title or caste[14]. Ratan Biswas, an indigenous Researcher of Indian north-bangal claimed in 2001 that, 7 thousand Khens are residing in Cochbihar district of India[15].

II. Racial Identity of the Khen

The Khen people claims, they are same racial clarity like Rajbonsis but truth is that they were a mixed-ethrie tribe. Physically they looks like Rajbansis but Rajbonsis derived from monogoloid race. On the otherhand, Khen's physical colour are not same to Rajbansis or Mongoloid People : their hair is straight and blackish, eye is slightly brown and round, nose is flattened, eye-leaf is bent down, body without hair, height about 5 fit, mouth is almost round.

In our Investigation, we have not found same racial charaeteristics of Khen with Rajbansis. They are more different from mongoloid race by colour and other physical clarity. Ruther, we refer them to Proto-Australoid identity. The Proto-Australoid people are short to passable by height, skulp is long to middle in size, nose is wide, slightly hairy body, colour is black, wavy hair[16]. We have seen these ethnic type of men among the Khen. Physical characteristics of the Coch people are almost same with the khen[17].

From our study in kurigram district, we can say that, physical similarity of khen are very near to Bodo, Coch and Mech people. A notable number of Khen and Mech were inhabited in ancient Prag-Joytishpur' (Assam) state.The admixture of Khen and Mech was an important factor to making a new sub-race.It causes for origin of Khen people.

In Cochbihar district of India, at present time Khen are mostly introducing themselves as ÔRajbansis' and have exchanged their title[18]. In kurigram district of Bangladesh, Khen people choosen their title like ÔModak' ÔMandal' ÔKhen' ÔSen' ÔKundu' ÔDas' ÔRoy' ÔBarman'ÔAdhikary' ÔKaibarlo' etc.Otherside, the Muslim uses ÔNatso sheikh' title.It is to be said here that the muslim Khen do not aware about there title, they uses only a common name.

With this study, we may come to this dissission that, in ancient time the Coch, Meeh, Tharu, Rajbansi and khen people settled in Jalpaiguri and Cochbihar in North Bengal of India and at the same time, they also migrated in greater Rangpur and Dinajpur District of Bangladesh. After residing for a long time as neighour, these people received same racial and physical characteristics.

The Bodo and Mech people migrated from Prag-Jyotishpur and the Khen people also came from same region.This migration have been completed before establishing coch dynesty in 16th century. In khens blood and physical structure there had a great admixture with Bodo, Coch and Mech people. Religious, ritual, cultural and folk-beliefs were same or very close among these people.

III. The Khen Dynesty

The ancient Prag-Joytishpur and Kamrup-Kamta Kingdom were spreated from north Darjeeling of India to south-east Mymensing of Bangladesh and plan land of Assam. These territory was dominated by three dynesty till 16th century, those were-`The Narok dynesty' ÔThe Palas dynesty' and'The Khen dynesty'[19].

Nildhoj was the first king of khen dynesty.He was probably a provincial emperor ÔBhuiyan'.His period was from 1440 to 1460 A.D.His title was ÔKhen' or ÔKhan'[23]. According to Kamrupburunjee, Nildhoj was a coch-ancestor and he established independent Kamta state.He was a great follower of Goddes ÔKamda'.Nildhoj introduced the name ÔKamta' state and capital ÔKamtapur' aceording to his ÔKamda' Goddes[20].

Another source said that, Nildhoj defeated a king of Palas of kamrup and established kamta state.He exchanged his capital from Guahati of Assam to Gosanimari (Kamtapur) of Cochbihar. King Nildhoj made opportunity for a big number of ÔBrahman' from Mithila to his state by inhabiting them in his capital.He upgreated Khen caste from lower class to high level and made his religious identity as real Hinduism[21]. Nildhoj constructed a big Fort at his capital kamtapur.The fort situated 22 k.m South west from modern cochbihar district town.Nildhoj established historic Kamteshwary temple in the fort.This fort was familier as one of the great fort in north-east India[22].

Second Khen king Chakradhoj ruled kamtapur state from 1460 to 1480.He made his state secured from the attaced of ÔGaura kings'.[23]

Nilambar, the third king of Khen dynesty was greatest king among the khen kings.He built many roads and forts in his kingdom.Nilambar widen his state from west of Jalpaiguri to Borak river velly of Assam.All of the territory of Rangpur was occopied by him[24].At last, in 1498-99, the muslim king of Gaura Hussain Shah defeated king Nilambar and occopied kamrup-kamta state[25].

IV. Social Status

Society: There are no separate administration or social structur in Khens community like tribal or indigenous people. They takes shelter or seek administrative help for any family trouble or social crime or complexity to local member and chaiman.If local administration failed to solve problem, then they goes to lower court but khen people usually do not create any abnormal or criminal situation and most of them do not try to relate with unlawfull activities. They like to live peaceful and unitedly.The khen leads Patrilineal family structure.In early days, they leaded joint family but presently lives in

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a single unit.But they keeps their father and mother with them.The khens do not take part directly in local politics, yet they closely take part in local election and offen they win.

There can be many differences in socio-economic context between cochbihar's khen with Kurigram and Dinajpur district's khen in Bangladesh but their physical and racial structure are same.After dividation of India in 1947.so many khen people crossed the Bangladesh border and went to cochbihar of India. At the same time, so many Khen came to Kurigram and Dinajpur in Bangladesh.The dividation of India created a great change in their caste and social system. In India, they used prestigious title ÔPatranabish' `khandakar' `Pramanik' `Chowdhuri' etc.But at present these are treated as a simple clarity.These titles are not uses among the khens of Bangladesh. Tthe muslim title ÔNatso Shekh' are not found today in Kurigram or Dinajpur.

Mr. Protul Chandra Sen, a khen leader of kurigram, said to us, before independence of India, the khens were used title `Sen khastriya'.He shown us a registered deed of land where we saw this title, We collected series of informations about khen community from 62 years old school teacher Dhireadranath Sen, 60 years old khagendranath Sirker and others of Phulbari upozila in Kurigram[26]. Among the people we found 2 with Ôsen' one Ôsirker' and other 5 with `Barman' title. Many of khens of our survey area told us that, although they follows all religious, ritual and social customs of ÔRajbansi khastriya' but they do not uses Rajbansi title.

In India, the khen uses both- ÔKhen' or ÔSen' title but Bangladeshi khens uses the tittes, like Sen, Sirkar, Roy, Barman and Mandal. Another worthmentioning point is that, yet the khen feels similarity with Rajbansis but Rajbansis do not agree them as their own people.

The khens are more undeveloped community than other local people, even about literacy.In Bangladesh, Ministry of Education introduced many schoarships and opportunities to increase Literacy rate for students. For this opportunities, khens also showing interest to take education in recent time. The ratio of education of khens almost 40 percent where as total country ratio is 90 percent.In middle and higher level, the ratio of education of khens is not more than 3 to 5 Percent[27].Juvenile crime, robbery, riot and ediction in khens community are very few.

V. Professions

Cultivation is the main occupation of khen people.They depents mostly on agriculture but they have no sufficient land for agriculture like other local inhabitant. The number of landless khens were not so big before some decades but in present time, the ratio of landholder Khens not more than 10 percent, ofcourse, they have own small house only.so that, it was not possible to live only depends on cultivation. For that, some people takes land from local big farmer as lon in condition of that, khen people will give two-third portion of corn to land holder. This system also continued among other land[ess local people.

In very recent time, the local landholder introduced modern equipment to cultivation land.For this changing system, landless khen fermers lost opportunity to receive land as lon.Now they involved on fishing, farming, labouring in land, in industries, business place, farmhouse, horticulture, poltry-farm etc.A small number of middle and higher level educated Khen doing service in NGOs, Schools and working as medical representative. Some young people of khen earns mony by giving rent motor bike, some of them are rikshow-van puller.In recent present, a little number of young khen girls began working in Garments Industries. Recrntly,a few young khen boys going abroad as unskilled labour.

In another observation, we have seen that NGOs are working among khen people.Specially women khens are deeply associated with NGOs micro-credit programs. Khen people told us that, although they do not feeling much poverty but they could not earn suffient money for deposit.The khen women now a days almost self-dependent. They do not depend on their men for every crisis,They are almost on a same truck like their men.They recieving honour from their men like indigenous people. In fine, we may comment that, khen are strongly trying to overcome Poverty line.

VI. Rituals and Customs

Religious and social customs and rituals in khens community are tradional and successive.They shows respect on former customs and brings it on their every-day life very sincierly.

The khens practices many many rituals like Rajbamsis and other schedule caste not only on occasion or festive days but they followes it every moment in their life. The Gods and Goddes figure keeps at a small worship cottage (own temple) inside or near of their home.Some picture of deity Hanuman, kali, Parbati, Siva, Duraga, Lasmi, Ram-Sita-Lasman and Radha-Krishna obviously Kept on their thrashed wall.A small earthen figure of Hanuman or Lasmi or Siva Kept on a high place. All man and woman.specially women strats their days and at dawn with showing respect to them very humbly.Honuman is most preferable house-deity among other God and Goddes. They offer prayer upon related deity just after sunset.At this time they offer evening light (sandhabati) without fail. In every home has a separate but respectful small high place where they keeps a holly tree- ÔTulsi'.At sunset, they offer light (Prodip) under it.

In khens family, there must be a home-deity (griho-debota). They believe that, home deity is

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responsible for all welfare or bedness of their lives.They have many other Goddes like- Ôshitala' Ôsubachani' ÔBishohori', ÔMashan' ÔChauni' ÔKali' ÔHabangkali' ÔBhutkali'ÔShasthi'ÔShaitol'ÔMashan'ÔTistaburi'ÔMad anThakur'ÔMechenideo' ÔGanga devi ÔBuri Thakurari'etc.The khens offer workshop (Puja) on these women deity on the eve of related festive.They draws picture (alpona) on their floor with white colour and figure during offering puja.They draws mostly Impression of trees leaf and household things- like jar (kolosi),pot, even picture of animals. It indicates their minds are deeply close with natural beings.The khen women keeps fasting at that time.

Khen women follows a series of rituals during birth of a child, The pregnant women of khen community get extra fever and importance from her family and relatives.Her red-lead of forehead withdraws during pregnancy. Close ralatives feed her special food on 7th, 8th and 9th month of pregnancy.This called `Sadh Bhakshan' (expected fooding). The pregnant mother went to a newly built small and separate room only for her child delivery-called ÔAturghar'(child-birth room). Many many customs are follows in this small room for the time being.At present day, although this ÔAturghar' system does not continues commonly but khen women performed it in a short ways.Ofcourse they takes modern medical facilities but do not regret the customs.They also takes treatment from magician (ojha). After birth of a baby, they exercises other unavoidable rituals like ÔNari chedon' (dividation of vane from mother), worship of ÔNandimukh' ÔSholomatrika'(16 mothers puja).first feeding ceremony (Annaprashon), hair cutting (Mastak mundan) etc.

Khen men and women also perform so many rituals during marriage ceremony. Khens are followes two type of customs - religious and social.Some of the rituals are like that : turmeric ceremony, last un-married food (Aaiburo vat).water playing (Jalvaran),lighting five lamp (Panchapradip), Daraha (first seleetion), ÔKhudani'(blessing from bridal Party), exchanged of garland, bestowing of daughter (Kannadaan), welcoming son of law (Jamaibaran),taking oath with fire (ognishapoth), looking to the sun and make agree him to be a witeness of marriage.

In Khens marriage rituals, some natural things are uses as beliefs, like- banana, raw turmeric, rice grain, betel-leaf, fish, grass, stone, curds and milk, fried grain, virmilion, betel-nut, earthen water-jar, mango-leaf, cow-dug, flower, beam (cowrie), slice of iron, bronze coin etc. Khen people belive that, iron, stone and fire protect them from ominous and unfortune power, Rice, banana tree, mother fish, mango leaf are symbol of fertility and related to bride-grooms much Progeny.In khens marital rituals, there have a lot of magical and supernatural beliefs which derived from indigenous people. Caste system in khens marriage are followes.Although Rajbansi- Khen mixed marriage was not allowed in previous time but at present it is acceptable in their society. Widow re-marriage is a normal custom in khens community. ÔBride-price'and `dawry' system was followed in their community in past but at present it is not mandatory.

After death, Khen people are exercises many rituals.They performs funeral like Rajbansis.Their deadbody brings under a Ôtulshi' tree.Its head keeps north. Here it takes bath.Than,turmeric-mixed mustard oil-massage given to deadbody.Its eyes keep closes by tulshi leaf. After that, the deadbody covers with a white new cloth. Than it keeps on a bamboo cot. Here sandal paste (chandan) given on deadbody`s forehead.After that, relalives of deadbody takes it to the gravierd for burning.At that time and after burning the deadbody, many other rituals are exercises like obsequial. un-purity, un-oil boiled fooding etc.

Khen people celebrates ÔJonmastamy broto' (festive on birth of krishna) in September.`Durga puja' and `Lasmi puja' also celebrated in October with Hindu community.They performs `Dipannita' puja (happy light-night) in November.This is very important festive of the khens.They also exerises Ôshanti-shastayon' (peace desire). ÔBastu puja' (homested worship).`Home Jaggo' (fire ritual).`Guru mantra' (charms of pious man) etc.`Shitala'is very powerful and effective goddess of khen community.

Following the most popular goddess among the Khens: Mashan kali-Habang kali-Bhut kali (furious woman deity), ÔShosthi' ÔSubachani'(against illness) ÔTista buri'(godess for river) etc. `Charak', `Mecheni' and ÔBamboo worshop' are very desirable festive amog them. Goddess ÔShitala' `Subachani' and ÔBishohori'are the essential part of their everyday life. Khen people pray for help and family Peace from them against danger, illness and unfortunate situations.They offer ÔShaitol' puja for desire of a son, ÔBishohori' Puja performs for family welfaire.`Mashan' offering for facing troble.They offer Ô Bashanti' and `Chaity' puja for a happy new year.

It is worthmentiorable here that. almost all rituals and customs are prepared and performed by khen women,They uses some material for offering puja, such as:earthen or bronze pot and figure, green leaf of banana and mango tree,red lead, rice grain, raw betel-nut, oil, sieve etc. Betel-leaf and betel-nut is the main instrument during every offering and puja.

ÔMecheni' and `Hudma deo' ritual are the important customs for raining and fertility. In Mecheni khela, khen women goes to every houses of the village with an umbrella, a bronze pot with water, a winnowing-fan with some boiled rice grain. At a house, they stand by round and starts singing and dancing.They finish their performance with throwing rice-grain and water from pot. After that, they goes to another house by one straight line.

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The worship of `Hudma deo' (a dressless deity) is a very rare ritual for calling rain and fertility.Khen women only performs this ritual in deep nitght without having any dress or cloths . This causes, Hudma deo is a dressless deity, so that women also without having dress goes to a silent field where they performs dances and songs to Hudma. This ritual related with concept of sexual behavior of deities. Men are Keeps themselves in home during whole formalities.

VII. Everyday life of Khen People

Everyday life of khen people are very simple.They lives in a single home with their wife and children.They uses only one or two separate room but there must have a homestead deity room. Men wears dhuti, fatua, shirt and half guensey.In recent past khen, women were uses only one part of cloth upto breast-this called `Bukuri' and `Patani' and men were uses a very small part of cloth for covering only his middle part of body-this called `Nengti'-but at present these are not using. Women wears shari and men using pant, shirt, lungi.Khen people habituated to sleep on earthen floor generaly, although some of them slecps on bamboo-stool and a few are on cot. They uses a jute-made cloth, named `dhakora' as bed-sheet and for Protection from winter days.

VIII. Conclusion

In our survey.we found that, at present the khen are not an Indigennous group of people, not a tribal one, even they are not like traditional local Bengali people.Their social trends, rituals, customs, religion and beliefs almost similar with Rajbansi traditions, although they have clearly separate racial identity. The khens are gradually changing and developing their overall socio-economic conditions. We are sure that, there will not be any differences between Rajbansi and Khen People in near future.

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