

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

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Abstract

The 'Coch' and 'Tharu' were the ancient People of North-Bengal of India and Bangladesh, next important tribal people were the Khen in this territory. We are well known about the Rajbansis, Mech and Coch people but we have not sufficient evidences regarding origin, migration and habitation of the Khen community. We have informations only about Khen kings and their administration, their religious and archaeological activities. History almost silent about its common people. In North-Bengal of India (Cochbihar district) and Bangladesh (District of Rangpur and Dinajpur) Khen are a remarkable scheduled caste till today. We conducted a short anthropological survey on common Khen people in this article. Our survey mostly based on Kurigram district of Rangpur in Bangladesh and secondary data collected from Indian sources.

Index terms— Khen, Kamrup-kamta, ritual, proto-australoid, mongoloid.

1 I.

Origin of the Khen the word 'Khen' itself have many complexive and opposite meaning. In Assamese language 'Khen' or 'Kamta' are parallel term, it means 'King' 'Great' 'Excellent' etc. We found 'Khen Kamta' or Khen 'Kamatashwar' word in greatbook 'Ahomburunjee'. It is most possible that the clarification of this Khen people derived from 'Khen' or 'Khen' 1 words. Another source informed that, it originated from 'Khen' 2. According to 'Kamrupburunjee'-The first king of Khen dynasty Nildhoj were derived from Coch People. His father had Khasriya origin but his mother was a fallen woman. For that reason he called as 'Khen' 3. According to another source, the Khen or Kamatashwar Nildhoj was a mixed racial identity. 'Kh' for 'Khasriya' and 'n' for 'nati' (fallen woman) 4. The British Historian Montogomeri Martin has said in his book that, the Khen were feel comfort to introduce themselves as 'Khasriya' and 'Rajbansi'-although the Rajbansis agreed to absorb the Kings of Khen with their community and to use title 'Khasriya', 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 established the 'Goddess kamda' or 'Gosany' as a family Goddess and named her 'Kamatashwary'. He upgraded Khen dynasty as a real Hindu-dynasty from lower caste 'sudra'. 6 The Khen people had bear 'sudra' identity before Nildhoj becoming as a king. In Assam, they were familiar as 'kolita'. According to Dr. Hamilton Buchanan's opinion, the Khens only the people of Kamrup caste. Sociologist and Historian J A Vas described in his book 'Eastern 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 dynasty and they received 'Khen' title from 'Sen' 8. Almost all Khen people in Bangladesh identifies themselves as 'Rajbansi-Khasriya' instead of 'Khen' although they do not regrades 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 'Pre-Ahom' indigenous sub-group. They came to the plain land of Cochbihar-Rangpur territory through Garo hills. Khens also claims

45 that they were the Ā? "Hero' or Ā? "Khastriya' in ancient time. In 15 th Century, Khens were established
 46 Kamta state under the leadership of Nildhoj 9 . Dr. B. Chettergee described his book Ā? "A Cultural History
 47 of Bhutan' that, Khen People were inhabited in Khen Province of Bhutan. They have relation with Tibetan
 48 cityzens. B. Chetterjee chaimed that, Khens were migrated to Tibet from Bhutan 10 . On the otherside, the
 49 British Administrator and Anthropologist Martin said, the Khens were the inhabitant of Tripura hilly-forest area
 50 of eastern India We did not found present official statistics on Khens of Bangladesh. But educated people of
 51 Kurigram district in Bangladesh claimed to us that, at present (2013) there almost 20 thousand of Khen lives in
 52 greater Rangpur and Dinajpur district 13 . Dr. Bucanon Hamilton came to Rangpur region in early part of 19
 53 th century. He said, he had seen many many Khen family in this territory but the later part of 19 th century,
 54 Dr. W.W. Hunter did not seen so many Khens. It means, the T Khens became a small community after 50
 55 years.It causes for taking re-name of their title or caste 14 . Ratan Biswas, an indigenouse Researcher of Indian
 56 northbangal claimed in 2001 that, 7 thousand Khens are residing in Cochbihar district of India 15 .

2 II.

3 Racial Identity of the Khen

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

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

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

73 In Cochbihar district of India, at present time Khen are mostly introducing themselves as Ā? "Rajbansis'
 74 and have exchanged their title 18 . In kurigram district of Bangladesh, Khen people choosen their ti-
 75 tle like Ā? "Modak' Ā? "Mandal' Ā? "Khen' Ā? "Sen' Ā? "Kundu' Ā? "Das' Ā? "Roy' Ā? "Barman'Ā? "Adhikary'
 76 Ā? "Kaibarlo' etc.Otherside, the Muslim uses Ā? "Natso sheikh' title.It is to be said here that the muslim Khen
 77 do not aware about there title, they uses only a common name.

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

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

4 III.

5 The Khen Dynesty

88 The ancient Prag-Joytishpur and Kamrup-Kamta Kingdom were spreared from north Darjeeling of India to
 89 south-east Mymensing of Bangladesh and plan land of Assam. These territory was dominated by three dynasty
 90 till 16 th century, those were-'The Narok dynasty' Ā? "The Palas dynasty' and'The Khen dynasty' 19 .

91 Nildhoj was the first king of khen dynasty.He was probably a provincial emperor Ā? "Bhuiyan'.His period was
 92 from 1440 to 1460 A.D.His title was Ā? "Khen' or Ā? "Khan' ???3 . According to Kamrupburunjee, Nildhoj was a
 93 coch-ancestor and he established independent Kamta state.He was a great follower of Goddes Ā? "Kamda'.Nildhoj
 94 introduced the name Ā? "Kamta' state and capital Ā? "Kamtapur' aecording to his Ā? "Kamda' Goddes 20 .

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

102 Second Khen king Chakradhoj ruled kamtapur state from 1460 to 1480.He made his state secured from the
 103 attaced of Ā? "Gaura kings'. ???3 IV.

6 Social Status

Society: There are no separate administration or social structure in Khens community like tribal or indigenous people. They take shelter or seek administrative help for any family trouble or social crime or complexity to local member and chairman. If local administration failed to solve a problem, then they go to lower court but Khens people usually do not create any abnormal or criminal situation and most of them do not try to relate with unlawful activities. They like to live peacefully and unitedly. The Khens lead a patrilineal family structure. In early days, they led a joint family but presently live in Nilambar, the third king of the Khens dynasty was the greatest king among the Khens kings. He built many roads and forts in his kingdom. Nilambar widened his state from west of Jalpaiguri to Borak river valley of Assam. All of the territory of Rangpur was occupied by him in 1498-99. The Muslim king of Gaura Hussain Shah defeated King Nilambar and occupied Kamrup-Kamta state as a single unit. But they keep their father and mother with them. The Khens do not take part directly in local politics, yet they closely take part in local elections and often they win.

There can be many differences in socioeconomic context between Bihar's Khens with Kurigram and Dinajpur district's Khens in Bangladesh but their physical and racial structure are the same. After the division of India in 1947, so many Khens came to Kurigram and Dinajpur in Bangladesh. The division of India created a great change in their caste and social system. In India, they used prestigious titles like 'Patranabish', 'khandakar', 'Pramanik', 'Chowdhuri' etc. But at present these are treated as simple titles. These titles are not used among the Khens of Bangladesh. The Muslim title 'Natsa Shekh' are not found today in Kurigram or Dinajpur.

Mr. Protul Chandra Sen, a Khens leader of Kurigram, said to us, before independence of India, the Khens were used to the title 'Sen khastriya'. He showed us a registered deed of land where we saw this title. We collected series of information about the Khens community from 62-year-old school teacher Dharendra Nath Sen, 60-year-old Khagendranath Sarker and others of Phulbari upazila in Kurigram. Among the people we found 2 with 'sen' one 'sarker' and other 5 with 'Barman' title. Many of the Khens of our survey area told us that, although they follow all religious, ritual and social customs of 'Rajbansi khastriya' but they do not use the Rajbansi title.

VI.

7 Rituals and Customs

Religious and social customs and rituals in the Khens community are traditional and successive. They show respect on former customs and bring it on their every-day life very sincerely.

The Khens practice many rituals like Rajbansis and other scheduled caste not only on occasions or festive days but they follow it every moment in their life. The Gods and Goddesses are kept at a small worship cottage (own temple) inside or near of their home. Some pictures of deities Hanuman, Kali, Parvati, Siva, Duraga, Lasmi, Ram-Sita-Lasman and Radha-Krishna are obviously kept on their plastered wall. A small earthen figure of Hanuman or Lasmi or Siva is kept on a high place. All men and women, specially women, start their days and at dawn with showing respect to them very humbly. Hanuman is most preferable household deity among other Gods and Goddesses. They offer prayer upon related deities just after sunset. At this time they offer evening light (sandhabati) without fail. In every home there is a separate but respectful small high place where they keep a holy tree-'Tulsi'. At sunset, they offer light (Prodip) under it.

In the Khens family, there must be a home-deity (griho-debota). They believe that, home deity is The Ancient 'Khens' People of India and Bangladesh: An Anthropological Study

In India, the Khens use both 'Khens' or 'Sen' title but Bangladeshi Khens use the titles, like Sen, Sarker, Roy, Barman and Mandal. Another worth-mentioning point is that, yet the Khens feel 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 scholarships and opportunities to increase literacy rate for students. For these opportunities, Khens also show interest to take education in recent time. The ratio of education of Khens is 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. Juvenile crime, robbery, riot and ediction in the Khens community are very few.

V.

8 Professions

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

In very recent time, the local landholder introduced modern equipment to cultivation land. For this changing system, landless Khens farmers lost opportunity to receive land as long as. Now they involved in fishing, farming, labouring in land, in industries, business place, farmhouse, horticulture, poultry-farm etc. A small number of

164 middle and higher level educated Khen doing service in NGOs, Schools and working as medical representative.
 165 Some young people of khen earns mony by giving rent motor bike, some of them are rikshow-van puller. In recent
 166 present, a little number of young khen girls began working in Garments Industries. Recrntly, a few young khen
 167 boys going abroad as unskilled labour.

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

174 responsible for all welfare or bedness of their lives. They have many other Goddes like-
 175 Ā?"shitala' Ā?"subachani' Ā?"Bishohori', Ā?"Mashan' Ā?"Chauni' Ā?"Kali' Ā?"Habangkali'
 176 Ā?"Bhutkali' Ā?"Shasthi' Ā?"Shaitol' Ā?"Mashan' Ā?"Tistaburi' Ā?"Mad anThakur' Ā?"Mechenideo' Ā?"Ganga
 177 devi Ā?"Buri Thakurari' etc. The khens offer workshop (Puja) on these women deity on the eve of related
 178 festive. They draws picture (alpona) on their floor with white colour and figure during offering puja. They draws
 179 mostly Impression of trees leaf and household things-like jar (kolosi), pot, even picture of animals. It indicates
 180 their minds are deeply close with natural beings. The khen women keeps fasting at that time.

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

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

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

206 After death, Khen people are exercises many rituals. They performs funeral like Rajbansis. Their deadbody
 207 brings under a Ā?"tulshi' tree. Its head keeps north. Here it takes bath. Than, turmeric-mixed mustard oil-massage
 208 given to deadbody. Its eyes keep closes by tulshi leaf. After that, the deadbody covers with a white new cloth.
 209 Than it keeps on a bamboo cot. Here sandal paste (chandana) given on deadbody's forehead. After that, relatives
 210 of deadbody takes it to the graveyard for burning. At that time and after burning the deadbody, many other rituals
 211 are exercises like obsequial. unpurity, un-oil boiled fooding etc.

212 Khen people celebrates Ā?" Jonmastamy broto' (festive on birth of krishna) in September: 'Durga puja' and
 213 'Lasmi puja' also celebrated in October with Hindu community. They performs 'Dipannita' puja (happy lightnight)
 214 in November. This is very important festive of the khens. They also exerises Ā?"shanti-shastayon' (peace desire).
 215 Ā?"Bastu puja' (homested worship): 'Home Jaggo' (fire ritual): 'Guru mantra' (charms of pious man) etc: 'Shitala' is
 216 very powerful and effective goddess of khen community.

217 Following the most popular goddess among the Khens: Mashan kali -Habang kali-Bhut kali (furious woman
 218 deity), Ā?"Shosthi' Ā?"Subachani'(against illness) Ā?"Tista buri'(godeess for river) etc. 'Charak', 'Mecheni' and
 219 Ā?"Bamboo workshop' are very desirable festive among them.

220 Goddess Ā?"Shitala' 'Subachani' and Ā?"Bishohori' are the essential part of their everyday life. Khen people
 221 pray for help and family Peace from them against danger, illness and unfortunouse situations. They offer Ā?"Shaitol'
 222 puja for desire of a son, Ā?"Bishohori' Puja performs for family welfaire. 'Mashan' offering for facing trouble. They
 223 offer Ā?" Bashanti' and 'Chaity' puja for a happy new year.

224 It is worthmentiorable here that. almost all rituals and customs are prepared and performed by khen
 225 women, They uses some material for offering puja, such as: earthen or bronze pot and figure, green leaf of banana

226 and mango tree, red lead, rice grain, raw betelnut, oil, sieve etc. Betel-leaf and betel-nut is the main instrument
227 during every offering and puja.

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

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

238 **9 VII.**

239 **10 Everyday life of Khen People**

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

247 **11 VIII.**

248 **12 Conclusion**

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

Figure 1:

Figure 2:

253

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