

Theravāda Buddhism in Namsai District and North -East: A Historical and Spiritual Journey

In the serene valley of Namsai, where the golden rays of the sun rise over ancient monasteries and the gentle chant of the Dhamma echoes through the forested hills, the story of Theravāda Buddhism in Namsai District, Arunachal Pradesh, is a remarkable tale of spiritual continuity, cultural resilience, and modern revival.

Rooted in centuries-old traditions brought by migrating Tai peoples, particularly the Tai Khamtis, the Dhamma in this eastern Himalayan outpost has thrived through the enduring faiths and visionary efforts of local communities and religious institutions.

The legacy has been further invigorated in recent decades through the dedicated work of the Arunachal Pradesh Bhikkhu Sangha, Namsai Pariyatti Sasana Buddha Vihara, and Mahabodhi Society, Namsai, giving the region new momentum in Buddhist education, social service, and international connection.

Theravāda Buddhism, which originated in ancient India and spread widely across Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia, finds one of its most vibrant expressions today in this remote corner of North- East India.

The principal harbingers of Theravāda Buddhism in the region are the Tai Khamtis, a Tai-speaking group who migrated from the upper Chindwin Valley (Hkamti Long) in present-day Myanmar during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

These deeply devout people settled along the fertile valleys of the Noa Dihing, Tengapani & Lohit rivers, bringing with them the Pāli Canon and the sacred Lik-Tai script. One of the earliest and most significant of these centres is the **Chongkham Raj Vihara**, founded in 18th century, serving as the spiritual heart of the Tai Khamti kingdom in Arunachal Pradesh.

In May 2024, this historic monastery underwent a significant transformation with its consecration and dedication to the people of Chongkham by Hon'ble Deputy Chief Minister Shri Chowna Mein. The monastery, rebuilt in traditional Tai Khamti architectural style, stands as a symbol of unity, faith, and the enduring spirit of the Tai Khamti community.

This Vihara continues to play a central role in hosting major festivals such as Poi Sangken, Buddha Jayanti, Rain Retreat, Novices & Monks ordination, Kathina- the robe offering ceremony, etc.

The Singphos, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group traditionally rooted in animist beliefs, have also been gradually influenced by Buddhism- especially through cultural interaction with the Tai Khamtis.

Over time, some Singpho families have adopted Buddhist practices, participate in monastic rituals, and observe festivals alongside their Tai neighbours. This blending of traditions has fostered interfaith harmony, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence between the communities, reflecting the inclusive spirit of the Buddha's teachings.

By the late 20th century, efforts to deepen scriptural study and practice led to the establishment of the **Namsai Pariyatti Sasana Buddha Vihara**. Conceived as a center for Pariyatti (scriptural learning), it upholds the traditional education system of Theravāda Buddhism.

Here, young novices and monks study the Tipiṭaka, train in Pāli and learn the ethics and discipline that have defined the Sangha for millennia. The Vihara's stupa bears a striking resemblance to the renowned Schwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar.

This architectural similarity not only highlights the shared cultural and religious heritage between the regions but also serves as a testament to the influence of Burmese Buddhist architecture becoming a regional hub for Buddhist scholasticism and playing a foundational role in uniting different Tai Buddhist communities of the Northeast.

A monumental symbol of the region's spiritual identity is the magnificent **Golden Pagoda (Kongmu Kham)** at Tengapani, Namsai. Inaugurated in 2010, this majestic structure, inspired by Southeast Asian architectural styles, has become a major pilgrimage destination and a symbol of Arunachal Pradesh's rich Buddhist heritage.

Surrounded by landscaped gardens and monastic quarters, the Golden Pagoda serves as a venue for international Buddhist conferences, meditation retreats and cultural exchange programs, drawing monks and devotees from India and abroad.

Adding to the spiritual landscape of Namsai is the awe-inspiring under construction 160- feet Buddha Statue at Noi-Dhamma, Lathao conceptualised by Chau Pingthika Namchoom. The colossal statue of the Buddha in meditation posture, overseeing surrounding valleys and forests is envisioned as a major pilgrimage and tourist attraction and represents a modern-day marvel harmoniously blending faith, art, and spiritual aspiration, reinforcing the identity of Namsai as a thriving center of Theravada Buddhism in India.

The construction and promotion of the Golden Pagoda and the broader cultural revival of Theravāda Buddhism in the region owes much to the vision and leadership of Deputy Chief Minister, **Shri Chowna Mein**, a proud member of the Tai Khamti community.

MAHABODHI IN NAMSAI

Though already a flourishing seat of Buddhist culture and heritage, Namsai was further enriched in 2012 with the arrival of the Mahabodhi Society, under the luminous guidance of Most Ven. Acharya Buddharakkhita - a revered disciple of the Buddha's path whose vision transcended time and place.

The Deputy Chief Minister, Shri Chowna Mein, himself a devoted follower of the Dhamma at Mahabodhi Society, Bengaluru, extended his support, as well as through the generosity of local Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) around 36 hectares of land were devoted for Mahabodhi- a gift not merely of earth, but of trust, faith, and shared purpose. The Government of Arunachal Pradesh has remained a steadfast companion in this sacred journey, offering support with open hands and an open heart.

Yet, Mahabodhi's roots in the Northeast run deeper still. Its journey began in Diyan, Arunachal Pradesh in 2003, and over the years, it has gently expanded like a lotus unfolding at dawn into 12 centers: 7 (Seven) in Arunachal, 4 (Four) in Tripura, and 1 (One) in Assam. Each centre, a sanctuary of the Dhamma, nurtures the spiritual and social well-being through Monastic Training, Education, Healthcare, Cultural Preservation and Humanitarian service.

The founding of Mahabodhi Lord Buddha College in 2013 offered a new path for the youth-education imbued with values, vision, and empowerment. The establishment of the Mahabodhi Monastic School in 2024, providing entirely free, holistic education to young novice monks.

The Mahabodhi helps sustain sacred rituals, scriptural learning, festivals, and languages, ensuring that the ancient flame continues to glow brightly amidst modern winds.
