

Proposing the Ways of Promoting for Propagating Theravāda Buddha Sāsana in North-East India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam

Chow Ongnee Chaupoo

International Buddhist Studies College

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University

Abstract

Historically, Theravāda Buddhism has a presence in Northeast India, especially in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, to which it contributes much in terms of spiritual and cultural heritage. This article portrays the present context and situation of Theravāda Buddha Sāsana in these two states, focusing on historical developments, geographical and cultural influences, and contemporary challenges. It looks to past methods of Dhamma propagation by the Buddha and his Sangha and draws upon those modes of activity in giving a critical report on the contemporary condition of Buddhism and the forces affecting its dissemination in the region. The paper also prescribes modern strategies that could help in the development of Theravāda Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The paper thus integrates some traditional Buddhist practices with innovative strategies, including community involvement, education, and cultural exchange, and identifies opportunities for growth along with modern challenges. The results aim to contribute toward the successful revival and expansion of Theravāda Buddha Sāsana, relevant in spiritual and cultural development within the region.

Keywords: Theravāda Buddhism, Buddha Sāsana, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Dhamma propagation, Northeast India, cultural heritage, modern strategies, historical assessment, and Buddhist revival.

Introduction

Theravāda Buddhism has deep historical and cultural roots in Northeast India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. This region, with its rich diversity and spiritual heritage, presents a very different context for the propagation of the Buddha Sāsana. However, despite its historical significance, Theravāda Buddhism faces challenges in maintaining and expanding its presence.

The article will discuss the most effective ways of promoting and propagating Theravāda Buddhism in these states, drawing on both historical practices and modern opportunities to foster growth and cultural harmony.

Background and significance of the problems

This Article will focus on the study of the Proposing the Ways of Promoting for Propagating Theravada Buddha *Sāsana* in Northeast India Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. It can be seen that Northeast India states of eight states, currently represented by Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura (commonly known as seven sisters) and the brother state of Sikkim¹. Occupy is an important niche in the history and culture of India. Moreover, the western frontiers of India are linked with western and central Asia the eastern frontier touching Tibet, China and Southeast Asia has played a crucial role in shaping the history of the Indian sub-continent entered men, materials, and ideas since prehistory time, and this process gave rise to the infinite varieties of races and cultures, with which India is distinguished today. In the fitness of things, the relevance of the region in the context of history, culture and archaeology of Indian sub-continent can be overstated.

There also have been flourishing in that area throughout the ages. Among the religious culture of Northeast India, Buddhism has played a unique role, which is well reflected in nicely decorated Buddhist monasteries, Stupas, other Buddhist minor structures, traditional arts and crafts, rituals, festivals and dances. In many pockets of the region, Buddhism is still a living religion. It is interesting to mention that though Buddhism came to Assam from the Gangetic valley sometime in pre-Christian era; its impact was limited to Assam only. However, during the early medieval period, Mahayana Buddhism was brought by Buddhist missionaries from Tibet to Sikkim and the northern and western frontier of Arunachal Pradesh.

In the present day the Theravada Buddha *Sāsana* in Northeast India of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam has faced several challenges and issues. One of the main problems facing the Theravada Buddha *Sāsana* in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam is the lack of awareness among the people about Buddhism. It means that many people in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam do not know much about Buddhism, its principles, or its teachings.²

The scriptures and languages of Pali are not well known among the people of Northeast India. Pali is an ancient language that is not spoken in everyday life making it difficult for most

people to understand. Learning Pali requires specific education and effort, which many modern followers might not pursue. When people chant in a language they do not understand, the meaning and significance of the words are lost. Without understanding the content of the chants, they may feel disconnected from the practice and its intended spiritual benefits. Ancient practices and languages might not resonate with contemporary life experiences and cultural contexts. People seek relevance and practical application of spiritual teachings in their everyday lives,³ which Pali chanting might not provide directly. Engaging in religious practices in a language they understand allows for deeper emotional and intellectual connection. Personal and communal worship that involves clear understanding and active participation tends to be more fulfilling and meaningful. In a globalized world, people are exposed to various spiritual paths and philosophies. When traditional practices do not fulfil their spiritual needs, they may explore other avenues that offer clearer understanding and personal relevance.

There is a general lack of awareness about Buddhism and its teachings in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. This makes it difficult for people to appreciate the value of the Buddha *Sāṃsana* and to adopt its practices in their daily lives. Many people in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh follow traditional religions like Hinduism, Christianity, and Animism.⁴ These religions often view Buddhism as a threat to their own beliefs and practices, leading to resistance and opposition to Buddhism.

There is a lack of infrastructure and resources for the practice and propagation of Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Temples, monasteries, and other facilities are often seen poorly maintained in most of places and underfunded, making it difficult for Buddhists to practice their religion effectively. Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are home to a diverse range of ethnic and different Linguistic communities. This diversity can make it difficult to spread the Buddha *Sāṃsana* and its teachings effectively, as different communities may have different cultural and linguistic barriers to understanding. For example, Austroasiatic speakers

Research Questions

1. What are the contexts and Situation of the Theravāda Buddha *Sāṃsana* in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam?
2. What are the factors of Prorogation Theravāda Buddha *Sāṃsana* in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam?

3. What are the Propose ways of promoting for propagating Theravāda Buddha *Sāṣana* in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam?

Objectives of the Research

1. To examine the context and Situation of Theravāda Buddha *Sāṣana* in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.
2. To analyze the factors of Propagation Theravāda Buddha *Sāṣana* in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.
3. To propose the ways of promoting for propagating Theravāda Buddha *Sāṣana* in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

Research Methodology

This research is conducted under qualitative research consisting of two parts: Documentary research and In-depth Interview research. It's methodology of the documentary research can be collecting data from the primary sources' commentaries and Sub-commentaries sources from the Buddhist text. Secondary sources are in-depth interviews by Buddhist scholars, officers and seniors' citizens are wisely utilized and the articles, magazines, journals, newspapers, and online websites relevant to the current dissertation are taken into consideration as secondary sources. The collecting data sources and data are accurate analyses of areas for further the outline of the study.

Expected Benefits

1. Understanding the context and Situation of Theravada Buddha *Sāṣana* in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.
2. Understanding the factors of the Propagation for Theravāda Buddha *Sāṣana* in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.
3. Having proposed the ways of promoting and propagating Theravāda Buddha *Sāṣana* in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

The Context and Situation of Theravada Buddha *Sāṣana* in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam

Northeast India in the context of India occupies a distinctive place due primarily to its

geographical, historical, social, cultural, and political features. Northeast India comprises seven states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura one of the newly Himalayan states of Sikkim. In the state of Arunachal Pradesh, there are also small communities of people of Tai ethnic groups who practice Buddhism following the Theravada tradition. These are the Tai Khamti, Tai Aiton, Tai Phake, Tai Turung and Tai Khamyang, who are closely related to the Shans of Burma and migrated to India sometime between the 16th and 18th centuries. Arunachal has been the land of Buddhists and is known for some of the largest Buddhist monasteries in India. Today we find Buddhist tribes like the Singhphos in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh believing in witchcraft. The different communities residing in Northeast India, find great resonance in the teachings of Buddha, whether they are practiced in the lush highlands of Arunachal Pradesh or the busy city of Assam.

Historical of Theravada Buddhism in Northeast India

The Tai-Khamti people were the first to bring Buddhism into the valley; they settled in the Lakhimpur and Narayanpur area and Buddhism flourished there till the British arrived and drove them away to Sadiya. Next came the Burmese invasion of Assam in the 18th century. They ruled the land altogether for a century. With them came the Buddhist monks, who spread Dhamma here and there; with them also came the Tai Phake, Shyam and other Buddhist people. When British India invaded Assam at the call of local Ahom rulers, they drove the Burmese away across the Patkai hills, but many people remained in Assam. In present, Northeast India Arunachal Pradesh, we see people professing faith in Buddhism.

Geographical and Cultural Influence in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam

Historical records refer to the deputation of Sona and Uttara to propagate Buddhism in Burma. After the Third Buddhist Council, held during the reign of Asoka (Rao, Manjushree, 1995). Except for the Ahoms, the other Tai groups were Theravada Buddhists before they arrived in Assam and maintained their faith till now. Therefore, Theravada Buddhist Culture and heritage are preserved by Tai Khamti people, who migrated from the Shan state of Myanmar, and have established Theravada Buddhists as a central aspect of their culture and religious life. They have built several monasteries in Arunachal Pradesh, newly with the Golden Pagoda in Namsai being a notable example.

i. **Buddha Purnima** (visas day) is a celebration on the full moon day of the Vaisakha Corresponding the May to commemorate the important dates relating to the life of the land Buddha.

ii. **Satang khao-wa** (Buddhist lent) is the beginning of the annual, three-month rainsretreat for monastics (Pali: *vassavasa*), the first auspicious religion day of the Buddhist length celebration in the full moon day of (July-August), with the beginning of the Buddhist lent

iii. **Poi kathina** (the offering of robes to monks after a three-month Buddhist lent Rain Retreat) Poi Lu Kong (Rain Retreat End) and (Poi Khamsang) Poi Khamsang is an important religious festival of the Tai-Khamtis relating to the ordination of a novice. In the case of the ordination of a monk, the term poi kham chao mun is applied.

iv. **Poileng** is one of the most important festivals of the Tai-Khamtis. The Tai-Khamtis celebrated the Poileng festival on the occasion of a prominent monk's death. The word 'poileng' derives from two words i.e., 'Poi' and 'Leng'. 'Poi' means festival and 'Leng' means chariot. So, the festival is known as the chariot festival.

v. **Poi Pee Mau** (New Year) with great enthusiasm. These festivals involve rituals, traditional music, dance, and community feasts, reflecting the deep cultural integration of Buddhism as known as Theravada Buddhist monasteries play a crucial role in education.

Situation of Theravada Buddha *Sāsana* in North East India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam

The situation of Theravada Buddhism in northeast India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, is marked by both revival and challenges. The Tai Khamti people, along with the Singpho and Chakma communities, are the main practitioners of Theravada Buddhism. The establishment of Buddhist monasteries and schools has fostered the revival of religious practices.

In Assam, the situation is similar, with communities such as the Tai Phake, Tai Aiton, and Khamyang practicing Theravada Buddhism. Assam's historical connection with Southeast Asia has helped preserve Theravada Buddhist practices, though many of the younger generations face challenges related to migration and modernization.

i. **Presence of Theravada Buddhist Institutions:** Theravada Buddhist institutions encompass a wide range of organizations and physical spaces dedicated to the practice, study, and promotion of Buddhism. In the context of NE India, the presence of such institutions serves

as a significant indicator of the religion's cultural, social, and religious influence in the region

ii. Socio-economic Conditions of Buddhist Communities: Theravada Buddhist communities in NE India encompass a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds, influenced by factors such as historical legacies, geographical location, and cultural traditions. Educational attainment varies among Buddhist communities in NE India, with disparities observed in literacy rates, school enrollment, and access to quality education. Limited access to educational attainment among certain groups within the Buddhist population.

iii. Number of Practitioners: The number of practitioners of Buddhism in North East India provides valuable insights into the religious demography and cultural landscape of the region. Understanding the size and distribution of Buddhist populations helps in assessing the influence and prevalence of Buddhism within North East Indian society.

Contemporary Challenges

Theravada Buddhism faces the challenge of cultural adaptation, especially in Western contexts. There is a need to make teachings relevant without losing their essence. The integration of traditional practices with modern lifestyles and values often requires careful balancing. Arunachal Pradesh and Assam states are home to diverse ethnic groups with varied religious beliefs, which sometimes lead to challenges in maintaining the distinct identity of Theravada Buddhism. Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, Theravāda Buddhism encounters significant obstacles due to the lack of robust institutional support. As youth move to urban centers, they often disconnect from traditional communal values and the close relationships with monastic institutions that are pivotal for the preservation of Theravada teachings. According to the Census of India 2011, the Buddhist population in India is around 8.4 million which is around 0.7% of the total population, which makes Buddhism a minority religion in India. The majority of Buddhists in India are concentrated in the northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Nagaland, as well as in Maharashtra, West Bengal, and the union territory of Ladakh. Over the last couple of years, Buddhism has received extremely low conversion rates in Northeast India. The pursuit of better educational and economic opportunities has also led to a geographical and social dispersion of the Buddhist population. The focus on personal and professional advancement can sometimes overshadow community and religious activities. The main concerns for most people of Northeast India include economic survival and upward mobility.

A Critical Assessment of Theravada Buddhism in Northeast India

Theravada Buddhism reached Northeast India first through its neighbors, Myanmar (Burma) and Southeast Asia. Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh share borders with Myanmar, where the majority follow Theravada Buddhism. A major challenge for Theravada Buddhism in Northeast India remains its peripheral presence per se, with the more pervasive influence of Tibetan Buddhism, especially in places such as Arunachal Pradesh, where the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism maintains a stronghold. The aftermath has been that the Theravada communities are always at the mercy of this majority form of Buddhism, even though their contribution to the spiritual landscape of the region is immense. Apart from that, the Buddhist learning centers in the region have made sure that the intellectual and moral growth of the younger generations continues to shape the social environs of these communities on the spirit of Buddhism.

The Factors of Propagation Theravada Buddha *Sāsana* in Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh and Assam

The Methods of Dhamma Propagation by the Buddha and His Sangha during the Buddha Era

The ways in which the Buddha and his Sangha spread the Dhamma during the Buddha Era were so well-planned and effective, and thus set a trend for the following centuries. The Sangha, guided under the aegis of the Buddha, travelled with him and lived often in forests or remote areas. Besides that, the Buddha encouraged dialogue and debate as ways to share the Dhamma. Oral Transmission and Discourses (Suttas): The teachings of the Buddha were commonly known as Dhamma, conveyed through Suttas (discourses), compiled in collections like *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and *Saṃyutta Nikaya*. The Suttas not only preserved the content of the Buddha's teachings but also captured the context and personal interactions surrounding those teachings, which allowed for a dynamic and personalized method of teaching.

Missionary Work of the Buddha's Disciples (Sangha): The missionary work of the Sangha played a crucial role in making the Buddha's teachings accessible to a wide audience. Another important aspect of the Sangha's missionary work was the establishment of early monastic centers and viharas, which served as local hubs for Dhamma dissemination. These centers also functioned as training grounds for newly ordained monks, further facilitating the spread of

Buddhism by producing well-trained teachers who could then continue the cycle of propagation. In this way, the missionary work of the Sangha not only ensured that the Dhamma reached new regions but also laid the foundations for a lasting and organized Buddhist community. Emperor Ashoka's role in promoting Theravada Buddha Sāsana: Although the term "Theravada Buddhism" as a distinct school emerged later, Ashoka's contributions significantly influenced its spread and development. Recognized as a patron of Buddhism, Ashoka embraced the Dhamma (the Buddha's teachings) as a guiding principle for governance and personal conduct.

Factors Promoting the Modern Propagation of Theravada Buddha Sāsana

Publishing and utilizing modern Technology: There are now hundreds of thousands of books available in English on all aspects of Buddhism and many books are available in other languages. As a result, every individual can acquire an extensive knowledge of Buddhism based on books as well as can access vast resources on Buddhism through the internet. In the modern days, every individual can attempt to learn, teach and expound the doctrine through the social networking. Therefore, Buddhist propagators in this day and age should take advantage of modern technology to provide younger generations across the globe with opportunities to get in touch with the *Dhamma*. **Propagation Buddhism in digital age:** Buddhist teachings are now widely shared through websites, social media platforms, podcasts, and video channels. These mediums provide access to Buddhist philosophy, meditation guides, and ethical principles, reaching audiences who may not have direct access to traditional Buddhist institutions.

Opportunities for Growth

Opportunities for the growth of cultural revival movements, particularly for Theravāda Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, lie in several key areas. First, the region's proximity to Southeast Asian Theravāda countries offers significant potential for cultural and religious exchanges, which could strengthen ties and provide external support for local Buddhist communities.¹⁵ Once they gain concrete benefits through meditation, their interests in the Dhamma will be awakened and then they can gradually lead to an understanding of Buddhist doctrine, to the study of Buddhist texts, and then to faith, devotion, and even the monastic life. Additionally, the Indian government's increasing focus on the "Act East" policy, which seeks to strengthen relations with Southeast Asian nations, provides an opportunity for the region to

capitalize on shared religious and cultural heritage. As noted by M. Mayilvaganan,¹⁶ these opportunities for growth can be realized through more concerted efforts from both governmental and non-governmental institutions to invest in religious infrastructure and promote the region's rich Buddhist heritage.

Opportunities for growth in education and awareness related to Theravāda Buddhism in Northeast India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, are promising but require strategic development. This could also attract international Buddhist scholars and practitioners, creating a dynamic exchange of knowledge and support.¹⁷ Deepika Bhandari¹⁸ emphasizes both the challenges and opportunities for growth within Buddhist education. Key opportunities for growth and cultural revival movements include the use of Buddhist education to promote sustainable development and mindfulness as part of modern educational systems.

Conclusion

The propagation of Theravāda Buddha Sāsana in Northeast India, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, holds immense potential for fostering spiritual growth and cultural harmony. The Article points out how important it is to perceive the historical, geographical, and cultural factors in furthering the Dhamma. In contemporary applications, lessons learned from how the Buddha and the Sangha spread the teachings of Dhamma in their time may be used with traditional strategies combined with innovation in approaching modern-day issues. Such factors as education, cultural understanding, community engagement, and opening Buddhist centers and meditation activities serve to develop this task. Furthermore, the study enumerates a number of opportunities for growth, including growing interest in spiritual teachings, the patronage and support from both local and international Buddhist communities, and the possibility of integration into the broader socio-cultural environment of the region. By utilizing these opportunities and overcoming the challenges faced, the propagation of Theravāda Buddha Sāsana will be effective to contribute not only to the spiritual development of the individuals but also to the growth of peace and harmony in the cosmopolitan and dynamic communities of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

References:

- Anne M.black, Buddhist and textual practice in eighteenth-century Lankan monastery culture, (Sri Lanka: Princeton University press, 2001), p. 5.
- Buddhist Population in India, **Online source:** <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/5-buddhism.html> (25/09/2024, 10:30 AM)
- Chow Chandra Mantche, “Theravada Buddhism in North east India: a study of tai- khamtis”, Social research published by sciendo, (March 2019): 32.
- Deepika Bhandari, “Opportunities and Challenges of Buddhist Education”, Research Nepal Journal of Development Studies, No 6, (January, 2023): 30-35.
- Dr.A R Parhi, Dr. Ashan Riddi, History of north east India (1228 to 1947), (Noida: Vikas House Pvt Ltd, 2006), pp. 3-27.
- Dutta, Birendranath. Buddhism and Indigenous Identities in Northeast India: The Revival Movements, (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2014), pp. 132-135.
- Furquan Ameen siddiqui, “Target North: How RSS plans to make Religion saffron”, Hisdustan Ttime: Vol. 15, (Dec, 2024): 2.
- Gethin, Rupert, The Foundations of Buddhism, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 87-90.
- Kanai Lal Hazra, History of Theravada Buddhism in South East Asia, (New- Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1982), pp. 38-39.
- Mayilvaganan, M. The Act East Policy and Theravāda Buddhism in Northeast India, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2017, p. 85.
- Medhi, K. N, Buddhist Monasteries of Northeast India: A Study of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, New-Delhi: Omsons Publications, 2012. pp. 90-92.
- Rahul W, What the Buddha Taught, (New York: Grove press, 1959), p. 55.
- Skilling, Peter, Theravāda Traditions and Southeast Asian Influences in Northeast India, A Buddhist Connections in Southeast Asia: Changing Identities and Cultural Transformations, (Singapore: N. T. Eilenberg, ISEAS Publishing, 2017), pp. 65-68.
- Spiro, Melford E, Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes, (Los Angelis: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 175-185.
- Sristidhar Dutta, B. Tripathy, Buddhism in north east India, (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 2006), p. 26.